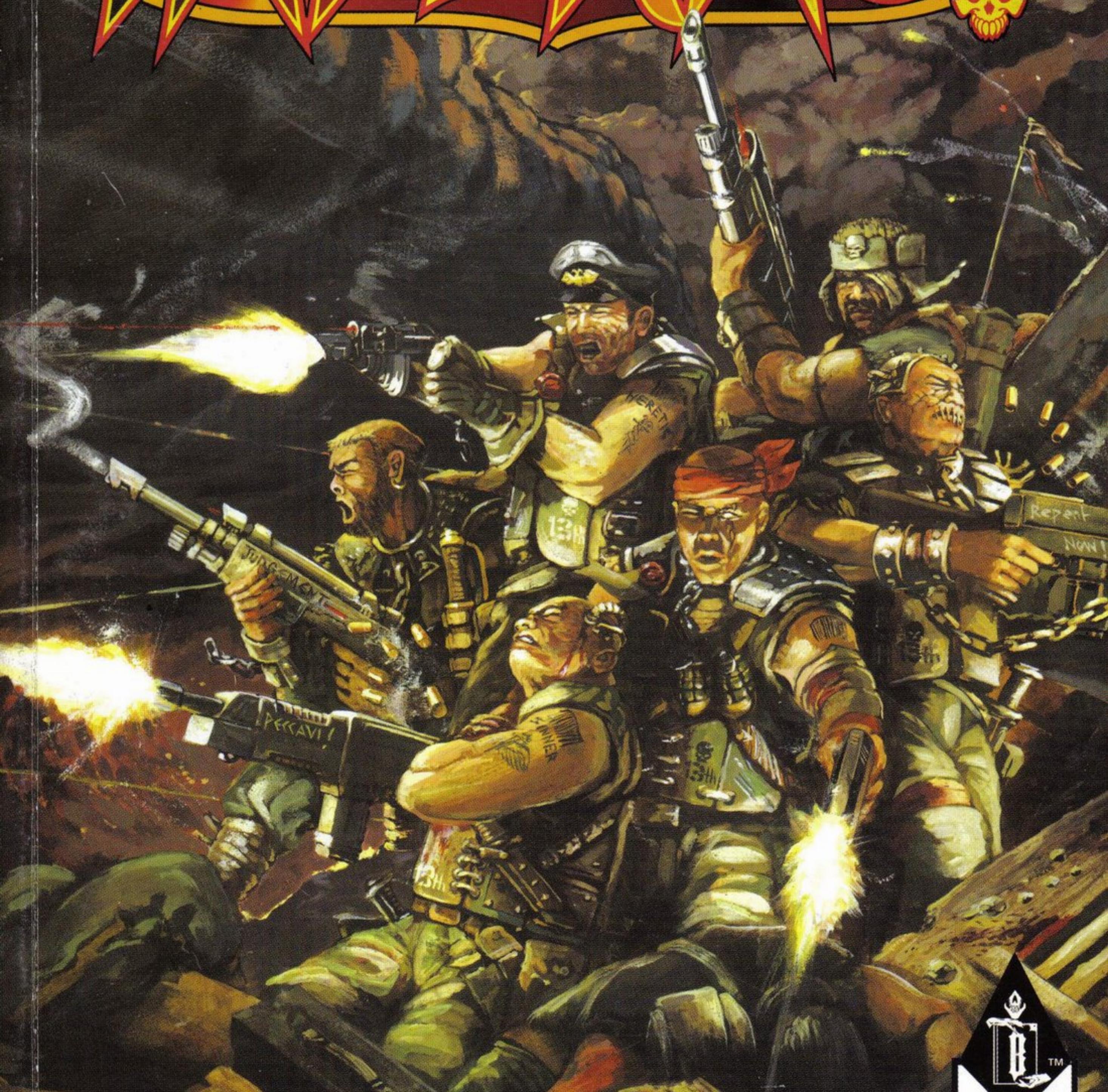


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CONQUEROR!



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TALES OF FANTASY & ADVENTURE



WHY DON'T WE ever have a story or comic strip presented from the Ork point of view? Or Goblins, even? Why is it always from the human side of things? You wouldn't guess the number of times we've been asked that here at *Inferno!*. Everyone wants to see an Ork or Goblin story. Well, it's never going to happen, ever (probably).

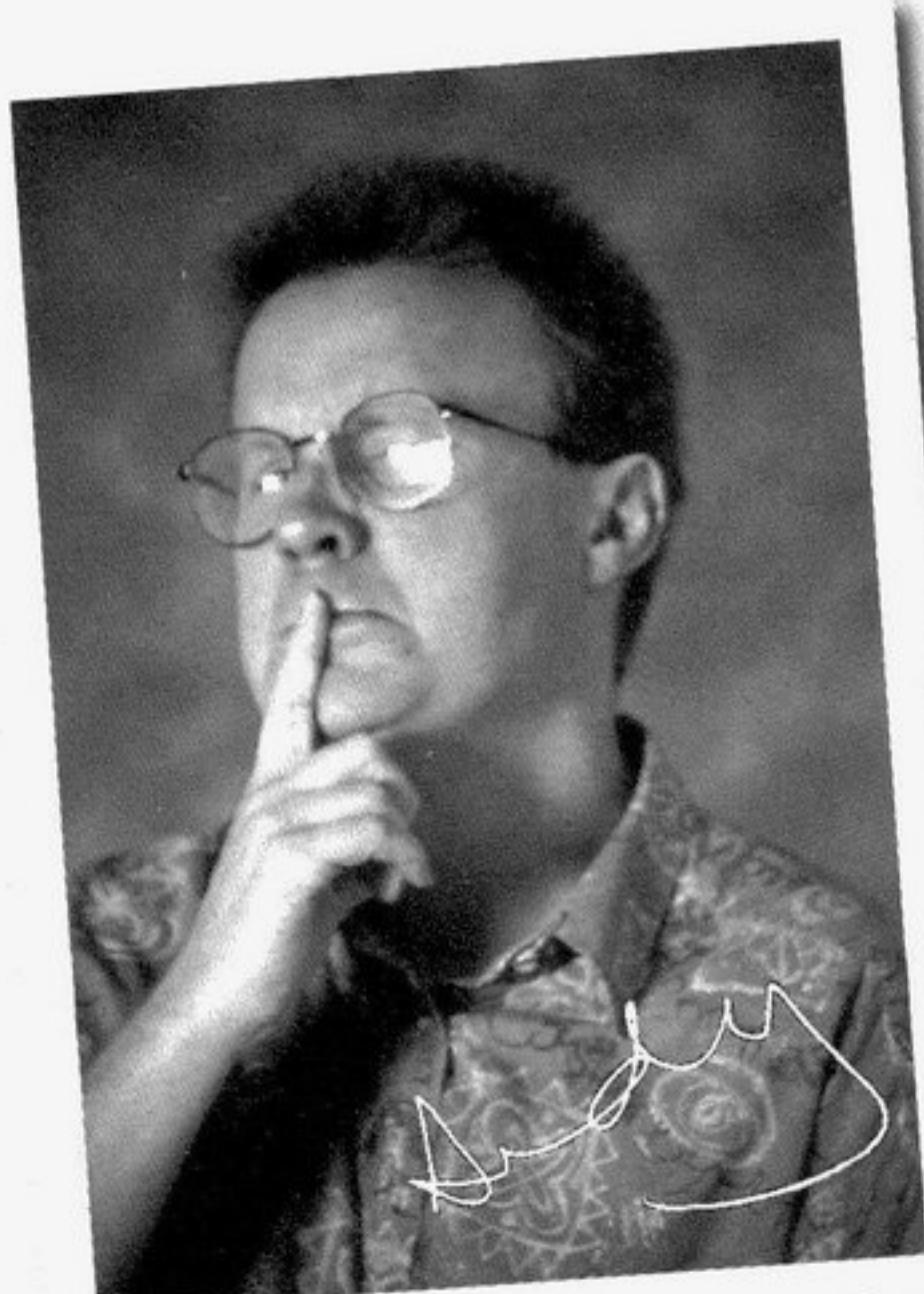
The reason is simple: Orks aren't figures of fun: they're massive, brutal killing machines with their own codes of honour, bravery, and so on. And putting that across in a comic strip is much easier to do when Orks are seen from the point of view of a Space Marine – or better, a puny Imperial Guardsman. Bestial snarls and growls don't have to be translated, as their threatening intent is made quite apparent by the Ork battering the hapless soldier to a pulp whilst uttering them.

Gretchin and goblins, on the other hand, are sneaky, mean, malevolent creatures with their own entirely nasty amoral code of behaviour. Once again, this can best be portrayed from the point of view of human interaction with them. The goblins' evil deeds will be thrown into

the worst possible light when we see our noble human warriors' horrified reaction to them.

But actually writing a story in Ork speak? And trying to be convincing about it? And present these hideous, powerful alien creatures as anything other than characters from a slapstick movie? Very difficult, nigh on impossible, I would suggest. None of the talented team writing for us has managed to get there yet. All we end up with is a string of: 'Dis is jus' wun uv my big gunz, puny 'uman. Lissen to it go BANG! Woz dat yer foot den? Oops, hur hur hur!' ...which isn't quite what we are after.

I always say it's like looking at gorillas or chimps in a



zoo (in a huge open enclosure with loads of space, trees, mountains, detached houses, Coke machines, Playstations, etc, to keep them happy, of course). To look at, they can be funny, amusing at least – for as long as you're on the other side of that lovely big fence.

Imagine if I clicked my fingers and suddenly you were in that enclosure with the seven foot silverback male gorilla. Not funny any more, is it? Because that gorilla is huge and very angry.

SO IT'S NEVER going to happen. No Orky stories or comic strips. Sorry and all that, but it's just the way it is and...

...What? Sorry, Marco? You say there is just such a strip in this very issue of *Inferno!*? That's a disgrace! We'll have to... Too late to change it? Who on earth let that slip through? Me? Surely not! Who's it by then? ME? AND WAYNE ENGLAND? Are you MAD? We'd never do that, would we?

Oh.

Well, it... was... obviously a cunning ploy to illustrate just what I meant about how slapstick it would all be if we ever did it, which of course we won't, even though we just have. Yes, that must be it.

What's it called again? *Rite Bait's Skwig Importium*... Ah. Yes, I remember. Um. I don't think I'll ever live this down, will I? Not a word to anyone, you hear? Not a word!

Andy Jones
Da Editor

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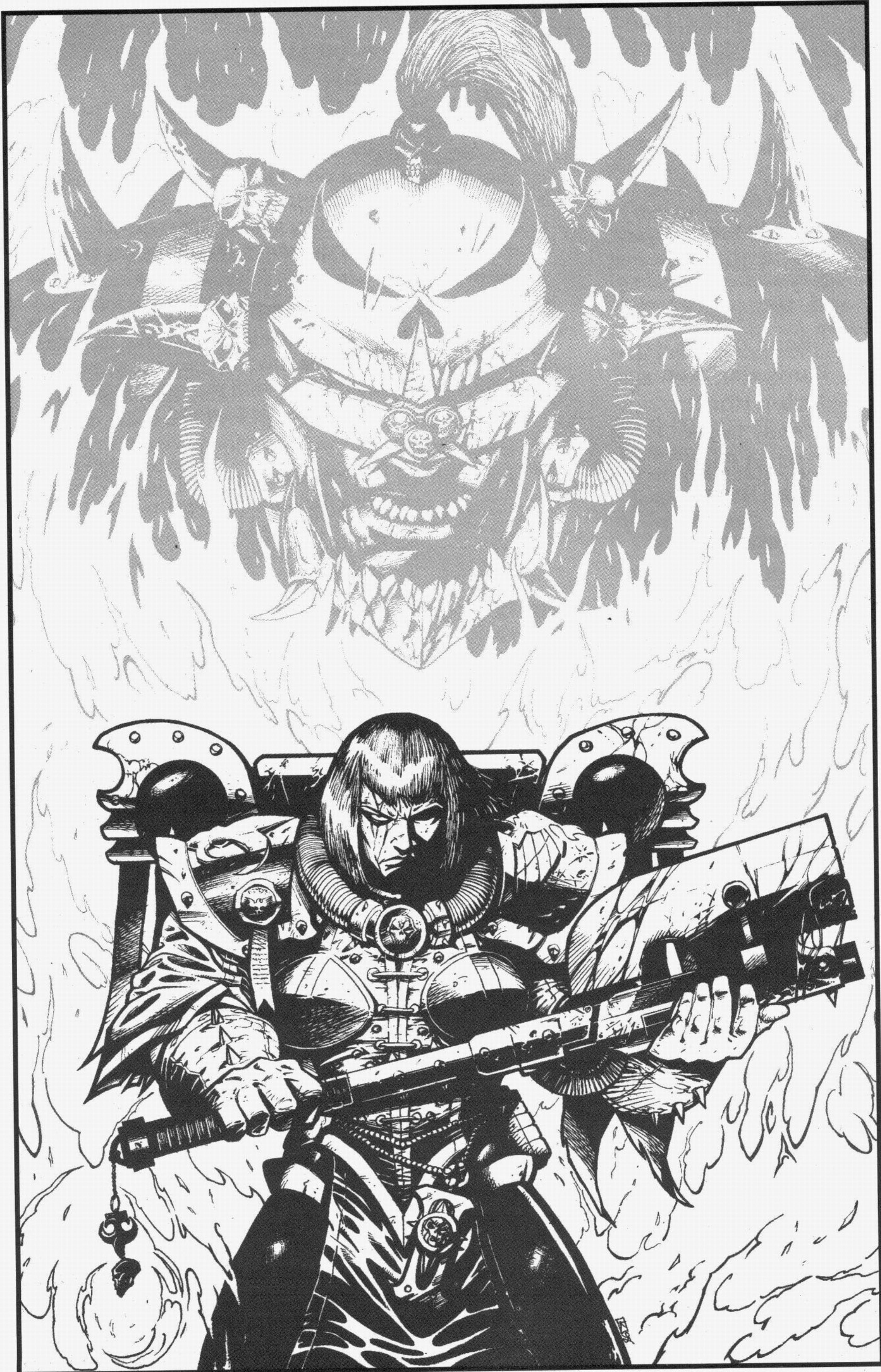
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DAEMON BLOOD

BY BEN COUNTER

THE SPACE MARINE and the Battle Sister gazed across at the sight before them. It was an ocean of corruption. It was a continent of evil.

The morass undulated gently, lit by the phosphorescence of vast colonies of bacteria and fungi. It spread so far through the subterranean darkness that it formed the horizon, and far away island-sized buboes spurted like volcanoes. Rivers of ichor oozed across the slabs of fat and tattered, stretched skin, bursting with the sheer immensity of the creature it contained. Here and there huge spires of splintered bone jutted up from the vile sea, picked clean of flesh by the layer of flies that hung as thick and vast as a city's smog and obscured the cavern's ceiling. This sea of flesh was dead, yet alive. It was the diseased green-black of decay, and yet it pulsed with the life of the pestilences which had made this rank, boiling ocean of filth their home.

Sister Aescarion of the Ebon Chalice tore her eyes away from the sight, bile and vomit rising in her throat. What she saw was a manifestation of everything she had been taught to fear, and then to hate, throughout all of her life. Yet there was little room for fear here, or even hatred. It was a blank revulsion that overwhelmed her.

She was lying on her side, still wearing the fluted angel-wing jump pack, and had landed badly on the thin promontory of rock which arced over the sea. Instinctively she checked her auto-senses. The respirator in her power armour was working hard to filter out the toxins in the air, and warning runes flashed all over her retinal display.

Hurriedly she tried to remember where she was, and the image of the heretic city flitted back into her mind. Far above them, on the planet's surface, the city of Saafir raged as the heretics and their daemonic allies fought her brothers and sisters. And here was surely the heart of Saafir's evil, encapsulated in an unimaginable sea of writhing corruption.

Beside her stood Sergeant Castus, the deep blue armour of the Ultramarines glinting strangely in the half-light. He had removed his helmet, and held his bolter by his side. His centuries-old armour sported several fresh dents and bullet scars, a testament to the ferocious battle which he and the Sister had fought to get here. Like all Space Marines he was tall, and his dark hair was cropped close. His face was as strong and forbidding as a cliff of rock, his eyes fixed grimly on the sight before him.

Aescarion grasped her simulacrum, rolling the ivory beads in the black gauntlet of her power armour. In spite of its comforting presence she knew the sea was alive, and that it could tell they were there. She knew that it would not make do with merely killing them.

'Brother Marine,' she called to Sergeant Castus, her voice small and quiet when usually it was strong and inspiring. 'Close your mind to it. Look away!' Castus did not seem to notice her.

I have my faith, she told herself. I am alive where no human should have a right to survive. The Emperor is with me always. I have my faith. But I fear for the Space Marine. Why do I fear so?

A ripple of movement shivered through

the air. Aescarion reached out and grasped the haft of her power axe where it had landed next to her. Its head, like a giant chiselled shoulder blade, thrummed angrily with the power field around it. She could not hope to hurt the creature in front of her, but she was not ready to die on her knees, and death in battle with such a thing would be a glorious end in itself.

But am I really going to die here? asked that voice of faith deep inside her. A spirit true to the Imperium never dies. And the Marine? He would have great strength of mind, as he had been trained – but strong enough?

A mile or so across the corpse-ocean, a chasm many leagues long sluiced apart, revealing layers of fat and necrotic muscle beneath, bloated and useless organs. Further away, two orbs the size of cathedrals rose up from the mire with a great, vile sound like a hundred bodies being pulled from a swamp. They shed their filthy membranes to reveal a gleaming black surface. Castus took a few steps away from the rock's edge, but he did not take his eyes off the monstrosity.

It was a face. A mouth and two eyes. When it spoke, it was with a voice felt rather than heard, deep and slow, and Aescarion could feel the waves of malice that swept across the promontory along with the thing's noisome breath.

'What curiously small creatures you are to present such a thorn in my side.' The words roared and rumbled through the air, thick with dark amusement. 'What little bundles of ignorant flesh. I am Parmenides, called the Vile, chosen Prince of Nurgle. I am the virus which the Plague God sends to infect your mortal worlds. I am the festering in your wounded empire. Do creatures as insignificant as yourselves have names too, I wonder?'

'Sergeant Castus of the Ultramarines, Second Company,' the Marine replied in a defiant voice, as if he were trying to impress the Daemon Prince.

The horrific gaze turned to Aescarion, questioning.

'I would not give you my name, though it cost my soul,' the Battle Sister snarled, and she gripped her axe tighter.

'Such a shame,' Parmenides replied. 'But the girl I can understand. Her mind is most infertile. What has she ever questioned? They teach her and she believes.' The corners of the chasm turned upwards. The thing was smiling. 'But you, my man. You are different, are you not? You can travel across the stars – but you do not know what lies between them. I could show you, my boy. I could show you why your omnipotent Emperor chooses to let his Imperium of toy soldiers be eroded by Chaos.'

Parmenides's immense face rose up in a vast static tidal wave that surrounded them like an amphitheatre of flesh. Now he gazed down on them from above, drowning them in his blank gaze. Sister Aescarion took an involuntary step back, then held firm. Sergeant Castus continued merely to gaze upon the corrupt being, his eyes steely, jaw set in righteous defiance.

'Now ask yourself, who is in the ascendancy? Every year more and more worlds are lost to you. No matter how you lie to yourself that the Warp is held at bay, you know deep in that untaught part of yourself that humanity will fall. The girl cannot see the inevitable. But you can. And do you really want to be dragged down by the Imperium as it sinks? You will die knowing your efforts were futile. You will die knowing that you know *nothing!*'

Castus shook his head slightly, but whether he was refuting the monster or agreeing with it Aescarion could not tell.

'I can give you flesh that will not wither, only change and become home to a civilisation of pestilence. Do not follow the Imperium when it falls. With my help you can crush it beneath your heel, and become an Imperium yourself, my boy! I can show you what secret this dark little universe contains. I can show you what it really means to exist in a world your Imperium is blind to.'

Castus's face was set but uncertainty flickered in his eyes like lightning. Aescarion could sense the insidious psychic worming that would even now be burrowing for his soul, but the Ultramarine was fighting it, trusting in the

Emperor, refusing to bow before Parmenides's strength.

Castus tried to hold his hands up to his face and block out the sights and sounds that were trying to change him, but he was pinned by great chains of psychic energy, to the rock where he stood, utterly immobile, held wide open and totally vulnerable to the mental ambush. He tried to remember the years of training and conditioning in the temple of his fortress-monastery. He felt himself getting more and more desperate as he tried to recall all those words of steel that had been spoken to him by the Chaplains ever since he had first set foot in the chapter's aedificium. But they were all slipping away, as his mind was dissolved by Parmenides's will.

'Nnnoo... nnnnn...' the Space Marine grimaced as he tried to form the words of defiance spinning in his mind.

It was a new type of fear he felt now. He had known what it was like to feel the air shredded by bolter shells and laser fire, to anticipate, every second, the hot bloom of pain. And he had become used to it over the years, until it was not a real fear, but an understanding of the constant danger that accompanied a sacred duty to defend the Imperium.

This was so different. Here, his body was not at stake. His mind was the prize, his spirit, his very soul. A Space Marine should never feel fear. But Castus felt it now, a fear of change to the part of him that had always remained the same, a part of him that was as sacred to him, in its own way, as the Imperium itself.

'Domina, salve nos...' he hissed through his teeth, grimacing, a thin trickle of blood running from one nostril.

With a mental shrug, Parmenides cast a dark psychic mantle around Castus's soul – a vast, terrifying emptiness, crushing, draining his spirit.

Castus knew that if he had ever been strong enough to earn the armour of a Marine, he would have to be stronger now. 'Imperator, in perpetuum, in omnipotens, in umbrae...'

Aescarion tried to drag herself towards him but the very air was drenched with power and she, too, could barely move –

she felt as if she were entombed in rock. Her ears buzzed with a low, savage laughter, and the abhorrent image before her was shot through with red flecks as her head pounded. 'Never break!' she yelled at the top of her voice, unsure if Castus could hear her. 'Never break!'

From between Parmenides's eyes a shimmering psychic lance leapt out and transfixed Castus, laying him open, white arcs of energy leaping off his armour to the rock, lighting him up like beacon in the darkness. Every fiendish trick the Prince could muster was poured into Castus's disintegrating soul.

The crushing power smashed Castus to his knees with an involuntary scream of panic. Deep in his mind he scrabbled madly, grasping for the memories that were stripped from him and were incinerated by the force of Parmenides's malice. Endless hours of battle blistered and died. The liturgies of the Ultramarines were blasted from his memory. And below even that, a past, a childhood, all were flayed away and burned. The threads of personality that had held him together melted in the psychic fire until all that was left were the most base instincts. The flame left him seared clean of all that had made him a Space Marine of the Emperor. Castus was reduced to an animal with no morals, no duty, no memory of the almighty Imperium that had borne him.

And no faith.

A tide of cold horror rose in Aescarion's heart. Castus was limp, swaying where he knelt, his skin pale, blood running from his nose and ears. All his mental defences had been peeled away and the shrill scream that she could hear in her soul was the sound of Parmenides's foul mind savaging the Marine's spirit like a predator tearing apart its prey. Castus had been strong – but this foul Chaos filth had been stronger.

'Do you join me? Do you belong, fleshy little ignorant man?' The Daemon Prince's voice rose amidst a screeching psychic crescendo. 'Answer! Answer! Do you embrace knowledge, and the plague, and the true path of humanity? Do you transcend your sad little species? Will you

watch them fall beneath you, while you walk the stars?

'Do you join me?'

In a heartbeat the mental chains shattered, and Aescarion could move again. But she knew that this was the worst sign, because it meant that Castus had succumbed.

'Yes!' Castus yelled in a monstrous, throaty voice that was not his, throwing his arms wide apart as if offering himself to sacrifice. 'Oh yes!'

Parmenides laughed, and great walls of flesh pounded against the walls of the promontory, sending debris crashing around them. Aescarion was not going to die here. She was not going to join the Emperor, not just yet. The moment Castus gave himself to Chaos, he had given her something to avenge.

She swung her power axe above her head and rushed at Castus, smashing the blade down amidst its howling blue power field. Castus blocked it with his forearm and his hand was severed in a waterfall of sparks. He looked back at her, not with the eyes of a man, but with the same black, filmy, liquid eyes of the Daemon prince, and smiled at her with Parmenides's malevolent grin. His skin was scarred and pockmarked by the heat generated by the Daemon Prince's invasion, his teeth were cracked and shattered. His body had been wracked and broken enough – but that was nothing compared to the mutilation of his soul.

He did not bother to draw his combat knife or raise his gun. He simply drove the heel of his remaining hand into Aescarion's breastbone and sent her sprawling across the rock with a strength not even a Space Marine should have.

The Sororitas clung to the rock and saw the waves of filth rising towards her. She drew her stiletto combat knife from its sheath, but instead of rushing at her new nemesis and dying a good death, she drove it into the casing of her own jump pack. In two strokes the fuel inhibitor was sliced out, clear fuel spurting onto the stone.

'Damnation tuum,' she growled through clenched teeth. A heartbeat passed and her jump pack erupted into life. She

rocketed into the air on a plume of flame as all the fuel was ignited at once. Her ears were filled with the roar of superheated air. The savage heat slammed against her and knocked her half-unconscious. The pack fused solid. The armour on her back began to melt and her hair caught fire.

As she soared upwards and prayed that she should be immolated before falling back into the cavern, far below her the enfolding waves of Parmenides's corrupt flesh covered Castus. In the darkness below Saafir, a new champion of Chaos was born.



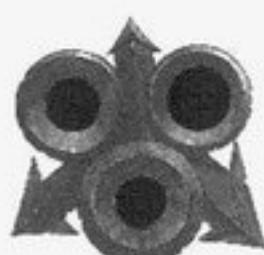
AS THEY WITHDREW from the burning ruins of the city of Saafir, the Imperial forces found Sister Aescarion, broken and shattered. Her fellow Sororitas had taken her from the rubble and transported her to the Order Hospitaller in the Ecclesiarchal Palace on Terra. In the dark majesty of that most ancient of worlds, the priests and apothecaries grafted new skin on to her back and furnished her with a new suit of black power armour and white dalmatic from her Order's vaults. They gave her back her hair, so her red-brown ponytail hung between her shoulder blades as if it had never been seared away. But she still had her scars, tiny scorches around her hairline, like hundreds of toothmarks.

When she gained consciousness in one of the wards of the Order of the Cleansing Water, they told her a story she already knew. They told her how the Ultramarines and the Sisters of the Ebon Chalice had been selected to support the Imperial Guard in assaulting and recovering the heretic city of Saafir. About how the cultists they found there were cut down in hails of bolter fire until suddenly a tide of foulness had bubbled up from below the streets, carrying daemons of the Plague God with it: grinning, one-eyed abominations carrying swords of venomous black metal, tank-sized beasts that killed with a touch of their bestial tentacles, and millions of tiny, pestilent

abominations, which giggled insanities as they swarmed into armoured vehicles and even between the joints of power armour. Aescarion was familiar with the way the Marines and Sisters had been forced back, selling every inch of ground for a few drops of daemons' blood, but finally forced to abandon the city to its fate as the forces of Nurgle grew overwhelming in number and ferocity.

Aescarion answered with a tale of her own, telling how her Seraphim squad had been cut down in mid-air by the poisoned blades of the Plaguebearers and vast thunderheads of fat, purple flies. How she and Castus had found themselves alone in the carnage, facing an assault that oozed straight up from hell. And finally, how the streets had given way beneath them and delivered them into the underground chamber containing the vilest creature imaginable.

She told them of Castus's fall from the Emperor's light, and they hung their heads in shame.



AT ONCE THE Ultramarine armour had been fused to his muscular frame. The blue surface and white chapter symbol blistered off and the plasteel plates transformed into a living metal which thickened and split, drawing itself into biological curves which oozed dark fluid at the joints. Sometimes he could catch scenes reflected in the dull surface – a darkness descending from the skies, the tear that splits reality in two, Nurgle himself emerging laughing from the shattered remains of the galaxy.

The Plaguebearers that attended to him brought him a morningstar. The haft was cut from the leg bone of some monstrous beast, and the head had been hacked from a stone so black it drank hungrily at the light, and a dark halo played about it constantly. To hold it, he had a new hand made of overlapping plates of dark purple crystal, which flexed and gripped with a cold, alien strength.

On his other arm was a shield as tall as

he was, bound in layers of human skin. The varying shades had been wrought into the triple-orbed symbol of Nurgle, and it was drenched in such sorcerous elixirs that it could turn the blows of gods.

The helm they placed on his head had a single eye-slit through which he seemed to see better than with any auto-senses. This was just as well because his implants had soon fled him, wriggling out of his new flesh like metallic maggots.

The Plaguebearers looked upon him with approval in their single glowing eyes, their ever-grinning mouths stretching wider. Castus held his new arms high above him and screamed a never-ending scream, so that even Nurgle on his throne of decay would hear him in the Warp and perhaps smile a little at the dedication of his new servant.



THE CULTISTS HAD no time to react as the circle of angels dropped around them from the ceiling of the space hulk's dormant engine room, stitching vermilion threads through their bodies with twin bolt pistols. The cultists were naked to the waist, their bodies and faces daubed with crude symbols in woad of strange colours, their skin white and tarnished by the touch of decay, their eyes black and empty. But armour would have helped them little here, as the concentrated fire cut them down before they could hope to fight back.

The graceful black Sororitas armour flashed in the light of Sister Johannes's hand flamer as it spat a gout of blue-hot flame into the centre of the circle, carving a charred canyon through the torso of one and setting two others alight. The cultists howled, spinning like madmen as the blazing chemical adhering to their skin tore its way into their muscles and organs, until their unholy life was burned from them. They slumped to the ground, skeletons of smouldering ash.

Aescarion's axe-head sliced down into one cultist's shoulder, severing the left side of his body to leave him staggering,

almost comically lopsided as his organs spilled out onto the floor. Canoness Tasmander had wanted to present Aescarion with an ancient power sword, in recognition of her famous strength of faith beneath Saafir. But she had refused it: it was too elegant a weapon with which to despatch heretics – they should be slaughtered like animals and pounded into the very earth. That had been a long time ago now – now she was in command of a new Seraphim squad who had become her Sisters – but the axe remained beside her just the same. And it was that axe which descended upon the hulk's ill-prepared defenders, lopping off limbs and splitting carcasses like a butcher's cleaver.

A spattering of lasgun fire broke against the walls; one impacted on Aescarion's greave. 'By sections!' she yelled and the Seraphim broke their killing circle, their jumps pack hauling them into the air from where they swooped down onto the remaining cultists. The last heretics died so quickly they didn't even have time to scream.

The hulk seemed to have been built by giants. In itself it was the size of a hive city, and everything inside it was immense. In the engine room, ornate turbines as big as city blocks loomed above, too high for their crenellated tops to be visible, and immense pistons bridged the shadows. Everywhere had been daubed with the primitive slogans and symbols of the Plague God, and a reek of death and despair hung in the fetid air. This was a dark, terrible place. But for Aescarion, that was good – because it meant she must be close.

The majority of the hulk had been deserted, and they had spent days picking off the few lifeforms on the scanner. This squad was now as familiar to her, after years of missions, as the Sisters she had lost on Saafir, and they were good, even for the chosen Seraphim.

She was good, too, she knew, for she had learned a great deal of warfare since Saafir. There was a new purpose to her, beyond the service of the Ecclesiarchy. It had driven her to pursue Castus across the stars for almost longer than she could recall, and now her nerves were on fire,

because she had found him.

'How far now, Ismene?' she asked.

'Not far, my Sister,' Ismene said, the ancient scanning device's pale green glow lighting her face. It showed that she was no longer a young maiden, fresh from the Schola Progenium – they had been hunting darkness for a long time now together. Strong, but not young.

'Then follow.' Aescarion strode through the darkness towards the corridor leading towards the ship's control centres.

Sister Johannes looked up from examining the smoking corpses she had created. While Aescarion's scars were unobtrusive, Johannes's formed a web of chewed-up skin spread across her face. They were a relic of a past mission to a hive city and an altercation with a chainsword, and made her look like a savage. 'Forgive me, Sister Superior, but how can you be sure it is him?'

'I do not know him well,' Aescarion replied, fixing her Seraphim with a venomous gaze, 'but I know him well enough. Follow.'

The rest of the squad checked their ammunition and marched into the corridor. The walls were streaked with foulness, blood and viscera. Scraps of skin clung to the edges of the metal. The passage grew narrower and narrower, until finally they came to a bulkhead that blocked their way. The symbol of Nurgle was smeared on it, in blood both human and otherwise.

'Grenades,' Aescarion commanded, and hacked the door off its hinges.

The Sisters threw their krak grenades into the space beyond. Aescarion's auto-senses snapped her pupils shut in front of the sudden light.

She was not afraid. She just wanted to see if he really was here, at last.

The flare died down and the captain's suite was revealed in tatters, its elaborate hangings and fine furnishings first defiled by the presence of corruption, then scoured clean by the armour-piercing shrapnel. The intricate murals on the ceiling could just be made out under the filth and scorching, and at the far end a huge, ornate window looked out into

space, a black velvet tapestry studded with a billion points of light.

The quartet of blasts had not killed him. Aescarion had not expected them to.

He stood in the flickering wreckage, a standing stone of a warrior, his bright armour twisted beyond recognition and corroded gunmetal grey. One hand was composed of dark amethyst cut into a thousand facets, catching the starlight in sinister forms. The eye-slit of his helmet pulsed with a sickly yellow glow, and his hands bore a full bodyshield and a monstrous ball and chain. He swung the morningstar slowly above his head, thrumming in the air and leaving an eldritch trail of reeking black fire behind it.

Aescarion felt a cold shadow of the horror she had felt many years ago. But that was not all. There was some pride, sinner that she was, that she had managed to track him down even though he had been sowing decay across the galaxy since he had first been turned. And most of all she felt that most wonderful thing: the blank hate of the Sisters of Battle, the refusal to accept that such an enemy could exist, the absolute certainty that to kill him would be right. Aescarion unholstered her bolt pistol and levelled it at Castus's face.

'*Damnatio tuum*,' she cried, and the Sisters fired in unison.

Castus took most of the shots on his shield, the rest going wide or ricochetting from his armour. Two penetrated and raised sprays of blood, but he stood firm. The champion of Nurgle swung his morningstar once and drove it downwards, shattering the face of the nearest Seraphim in a shower of bone. The next he drove to the ground with his shield. Instinctively she flipped her jump pack switch and hurtled away from him, hitting the far wall and tearing like a fly against glass.

Aescarion yelled with rage and dropped the pistol, taking her axe in both hands and rushing at her nemesis. Castus turned to catch her on his great shield, flipping her over with her own momentum. She hit the ground hard and felt something break.

A cataract of flame caught the champion

off balance. Johannes's mutilated face was twisted into a grimace – she made ready to sell her life dearly, drawing the hulking warrior away from her Sister Superior. Castus covered his face from the heat and swung the morningstar into her midriff, flinging her across the room, still trailing flames. A staccato burst of pistol fire from Ismene lasted only as long as it took Castus to behead her with a swipe of his shield.

Aescarion, bruised and broken but still alive, struggled to her feet. Castus had changed, too – he was faster and stronger than any Marine. But she had her faith, which was something Castus could not claim. She had her faith – and that had been enough once before.

The two circled slowly through the debris. Aescarion's auto-senses told her that the armour was pumping painkillers through her battered frame at an alarming rate. The pain was stemmed but she could clearly feel that the whole left side of her body had been badly damaged.

She looked to where Castus's eyes should be, to see if there was any semblance of humanity left there. Past the menacing glow, she thought she could just make out the shadows of a face, a pair of eyes that had once belonged to a human being.

This might be my only chance, she thought. This may be the last time I will ever be able to ask him.

It was a question that she had meditated upon for many years, something she simply could not understand. It was something that would keep her awake at night, and now that she had the opportunity, she had to ask.

'Why did you turn?' she asked calmly. 'Why did you surrender and desert your Emperor?'

In what was left of Castus's mind something flickered and a memory sparked. He had seen the woman before, long ago, rising on a column of flame. This was something Parmenides had not told him about. Could it be that he had not always been a servant of blessed Nurgle? Was there something else, a life that also happened to be his?

But that spark of recognition was

drowned out in an instant. There was nothing else. Nothing else but an eternity of beautiful decay, for that was the inevitable path of everything that lived: to rot, to collapse, to die.

'Why?' Castus's voice was thick and dark. 'Why not? He is no Emperor of mine. His Imperium is dying beneath him.'

Aescarion tried to hold his gaze, but it was gone, taken over by something inhuman. She slowly swung the comforting weight of the power axe, ready to strike, knowing that he would not hesitate to kill her as quickly as he had done her Sisters. 'It is dying because of weak souls like yours. You defile the spirit of humanity. Eventually you will not even care if you see defeat or victory – all that will matter will be the blood which is shed around you. Your damnation will make a shell of you in the end.'

There was a sound that might have been laughter from inside Castus's helmet. He held the morningstar high, ready to bring it down in a brutal arc.

'My beloved master Parmenides was right,' he sneered, recalling words that he was sure he had never heard before. 'You have no imagination.'

'Really?' Aescarion took a teleport homer from her belt and flicked it to Transmit. 'I would beg to disagree.'

A score of punctures opened up in space-time as the teleport beams locked onto the signal and sent their cargo. Three squads of Battle Sisters materialised with a thunderclap.

In the time it took them to pull the triggers of their bolters, Castus had realised that the woman had used his savouring of the victory to her advantage. Raising both arms above his head and yelling a vile Chaotic curse, he drove the shield and the morningstar into the floor with such force that it shattered and he fell, through the maze of decks and into the darkness below.

The Battle Sisters poured volley after volley into the hole, but as the tongues of fire leapt from the boltgun muzzles a great column of flies twisted upwards from the lower decks. So vast in number were they that the swarm of tiny bodies absorbed every bullet. The insects fell dead to the

floor in drifts, many ablaze, but by the time those still living had dissipated, there was no sign of the abomination which had summoned them.

Johannes, still alive, hauled herself over to the edge of the hole and peered down. She spat a goblet of blood-flecked phlegm into the darkness. 'This isn't getting any prettier.'

Aescarion kneeled behind her, exhausted. 'His master has pulled his puppet strings and dragged him back through the Warp to Saafir.' She turned to the Sister Superior of the first squad. 'Search the ship. Kill everything.'

As the Sororitas rushed to do her bidding, Aescarion pondered. She had lost him now. But she had found him once and she could find him again. A link between them had been forged. And if Castus had a weakness, that link would be it.



ON TERRA, THEY SAID, the very air tasted different, it had the tang of age and of honour. It was heavy with the smell of power. And they were right.

The Ecclesiarchal palace dominated a continent, as if the ground itself had sprouted a great gothic mountain range, fluted and pinnacled, shot through with uncountable temples and monasteries, all the myriad departments of the Adeptus Ministorum.

Deep within this vast creation were the quarters of the Ebon Chalice, the Convent Sanctorum. And within this, the chambers of Canoness Tasmander. Aescarion was not young but Tasmander was definitely old, a white-haired bull of a woman with a heavy face and deep, imposing voice. Her campaigning days were over now, and she administered to the practical and spiritual needs of her younger Sororitas. Once she had been a warrior of rare skill and ferocity, so strong and brutal in the pursuit of her duty that she gained respect even from the squabbling bureaucrats of the Administratum and the immensely proud Space Marines.

She sat in her quarters, at a desk carved

from black marble. The room was of similar black stone, an elaborate mosaic of the Order's symbol covering the floor, and all around hung ancient standards and litanies held in power fields to prevent their ageing. In many ways, the Canoness herself was a holy relic, old and revered – and still powerful.

Canoness Tasmander had seen many faces come and go on Earth. She had learned to recognise how they changed. Aescarion's had changed more than most.

Stood in the centre of the room, stripped of her armour and dressed only in her simple Sororitas robes, Aescarion lost half of her bulk. She was slender but wiry, with a strange pent-up energy that marked her out as a fine leader. She had been called before the Canoness few times before, and then it had been only for praise. But this was different, she knew it.

'Sister Aescarion,' the Canoness began, 'you know that I value you as a stalwart of this order. There is not one in the Ministorum who would not have cause to praise your faith. Let that not be doubted – you are one of the foundations upon which the Ebon Chalice is built.'

'Thank you, my Canoness.' Aescarion knew that Tasmander would not approve of her pursuit of Castus. She had undertaken it as a personal task, an act of vengeance, while at all times, the Canoness had stipulated, the Order must act as one. But surely, Aescarion told herself, the destruction of such foes as Castus was the reason the Orders Militant existed?

The Canoness leaned forward, her voice turning cold. 'There are paths down which our faith may take us which are false. I have seen it many times and it is one of the saddest aspects of my post, may He forgive me. For a servant of the Emperor to pursue harmful goals through nothing worse than devotion is a tragedy.'

'I have long approved of your determination and purity of hatred towards the Darkness which threatens us all. But if you look within yourself, you will find that it is personal wrath that drives you to actively hunt Castus, not the good of the Imperium or my orders. A Sister's duties are to the Emperor and the

Imperial cult, to the Adepta Sororitas – but not to her own lust for revenge. Your rage takes you away from this order and you are too valuable an asset for us to lose.'

'You will no longer be party to any military operation that may bring you into a confrontation with Castus. Are my orders clear?'

Aescarion turned her eyes to the floor. She knew that she had not done anything wrong. Her faith was strong. She could not do anything to harm her blessed Order, she knew that. But now she was barred from acting upon that faith.

Which is the greater? she thought. The orders of my Canoness, which have been the word of law since I was not much more than a child? Or my faith, which has driven my soul through this savage universe and never once failed me?

'I understand and obey. But if I may presume, this is a matter which affects me greatly. Castus's turning by Parmenides was the greatest act of abomination I have ever witnessed.'

Tasmander nodded. 'And you could not let that go unavenged. I am not attributing any wrongdoing to you, Aescarion. But the Ebon Chalice is an Order Militant. I can accept absolutely nothing other than total obedience. This order is a legion of Sisters acting as one. I cannot let you fracture that allegiance. Now will you heed the word of the Ministorum and cease this dangerous pursuit?'

Aescarion raised her head and looked the formidable Canoness in the eye. The war inside her was over. The decision was made.

'Of course,' she lied.



THE NEXT TIME he stopped to think about what he had become, Castus did not recognise a human being. He had died, and not noticed. Where once his blood flowed there was stagnant, brackish sludge. Where once organs had throbbed with life, there were desiccated twists of petrified flesh. He was not truly alive, but

knitted together and animated by the millions of diseases which Nurgle's unholy touch had introduced.

The shield's covering of skin had developed senses – when it fended off blows, he felt pain. The morningstar had become a part of him, the crystalline fist fused around the haft of bone. The helmet had slowly melted and reformed until it and his skull were one. Through its slit he saw only mottled shades of green and purple, the more diseased the brighter. He was something he no longer recognised.

But what did that matter? He had transcended mere humanity. He was the greatest of men. He would see the Imperium fall and live to triumph in its ruins. He should accept these petty changes and rejoice. Shouldn't he?

The warrior gazed down from the promontory. The cavern had not changed after all these decades. Above, the city of Saafir was a mass of festering rot, seeping through the ground, making the whole planet unclean. In the night sky, the nearest and brightest points of light were planets which had fallen to his daemonic hordes. But down below it all, the cavern was the same, with its long, narrow isthmus of stone on which Castus now stood.

And Parmenides, of course. The Daemon Prince was still there. Castus had long given up wondering if Parmenides was really a majestic demi-god who would deliver all he had promised, or a malevolent beast who was laughing at him. He had grown to realise that there were more important things. To serve Parmenides was to serve the greater powers which linked this world to the next with chains of their will. Castus told himself this every second of waking.

But behind his thoughts, wasn't there something else? Wasn't he a little more than the Champion of the Plague God? Hadn't there been a Castus before, a different man but the same? There was only one thing he could say for certain. He had not always been like this.

Below him, the immense waves of decaying flesh rolled and split, and Parmenides's vast face appeared once

more, with its malignant grin and dead black eyes.

'My boy,' the Daemon Prince said, 'You have done much for me. Lead my armies. Carved out an empire. Nurgle is much pleased. But now your talents must be turned to another task.'

Castus kneeled on the rock, laying his shield in front of him, ready to receive his holy orders.

'I must confess,' Parmenides continued, 'I cannot see how these little fleshy creatures can be such a nuisance. But now they prepare to strike back at us. A ship is coming, my boy. It is heading for this very planet, such is their insolence, so it is you, my treasured champion, who will demonstrate to them the insanity of their actions. Lead my fleet and be sure to show them the true way of all flesh before you break them. They must not breach Nurgle's sacred boundaries.'

Castus bowed his head. A cancerous shock rippled through their air. The warfleet's ancient teleporters took hold of the warrior's altered frame and hefted him up into orbit to make ready for the foe's arrival.



THE HALL IN THE centre of the Convent Sanctorum had been sealed for many days. Although a questioning nature was not encouraged in the Adepta Sororitas, Battle Sister Aescarion could not help but wonder what political machinations could be going on in there, carried out by men who arrived in secret, dressed in shadows. When she was summoned there, she realised the truth almost at once. It had been a long time since the Canoness had sought to separate her loyalty from her faith. While Aescarion had done everything she had been told, on all her campaigns skirting the furthest reaches of the Imperium, throughout the savagery of her many battles, she never forgot her thirst for the blood of Castus.

The hall had been a chapel thousands of years ago, rebuilt and absorbed as the Ecclesiarchal palace spread itself across

the continent. The grey stonework had been carved with stern gothic fluting, the ceiling was high and vaulted and the air was cold. In the middle of the hall was a large table around which were sat the delegates, perhaps a score of them. All but one of them were mere presences. The lights set high in the chapel's ceiling hid their hooded faces.

In the centre of them all sat the only visible being, the Inquisitor. He still dressed in his ceremonial Terminator armour, elaborately inlaid with precious stones, with the massive scarlet Inquisitorial seal on the ring of the power-glove. He had an intense face, drawn and lined, not with age, but with the terrors his calling had forced him to endure, and it looked incongruous amongst the great shifting plasteel plates that gave him the bulk of a walking tank. He indicated Aescarion's designated seat with a wave of the power-glove. It was at the head of the table, and her invisible judges sat in an intimidating crescent before her.

'Sister Aescarion... I am aware of the differences the Ministorum has had with the Inquisition in the past,' the Inquisitor began. His voice echoed grandly around the old stone. 'But I am sure you have seen enough in your service to realise that, while we may go about things differently, we both have similar goals at heart.'

Aescarion had always been suspicious of the Inquisition. With their obsession with secrecy, they seemed to her not far removed from the heretics they monitored. She had herself refused any part in dealing with them in the past. But now, she knew, there might be a chance to realise the wish that she had harboured for most of her career in the Ebon Chalice.

The Inquisitor raised his unarmoured hand and a servitor somewhere in the back of the room caused a stellar map to be projected into the air above the centre of the table. A network of fine lines and icons appeared, marking out the western edge of the Segmentum Pacificus. One planet was highlighted.

'The activities of Chaotic forces have always been our primary concern,' the Inquisitor continued. 'The planet

indicated is Saafir, which we have been monitoring very carefully for over twenty years. Now, we understand that there is an official position held by your Canoness regarding Castus and yourself. Is that correct?'

'That is so.' Aescarion felt a ripple of excitement in her blood. It had been a long time since anyone had dared to even mention that name around her.

The Inquisitor nodded gravely. 'A point has been reached where it is no longer feasible, we believe, for this to stand.' He gestured again and several planets lit up around the marked one. 'These are the planets which Parmenides and his foul hordes have secured so far. They are mostly barren worlds in which we have little interest. However, Saafir itself is of considerable material value, with incalculably important mineral resources.'

'I know,' Aescarion replied. 'I was in the force sent to recover it in the first place.'

The Inquisitor allowed himself a smile. 'Quite. For these reasons we have been content merely to contain this threat.' A dozen more planets lit up on the map. 'These worlds are under attack now. If Parmenides secures them they will give him a considerable sphere of influence. His empire is, in effect, a Chaotic centre of operations within Imperium-controlled space. This is a state of affairs that cannot be tolerated.'

Aescarion glanced from the Inquisitor's face to the shadowy figures on either side. She could feel they were studying her intently, trying to gauge her reaction. What could have brought them here, officials of the Imperium so important their identities had to be kept from her? Then she knew.

'The Exterminatum,' Aescarion breathed.

The Inquisitor raised his eyebrows. 'You are perceptive, Sister.'

'With respect, Inquisitor, though you will know I am not disinterested in the fate of Parmenides, I fail to see why I have been called here. I have pressing duties elsewhere on Terra.' She knew full well why they needed her. But she wanted, she needed to hear them say it.

'Sister Aescarion, Parmenides's area of influence has recently become off-limits to

all Imperial craft. Any warfleet we send will be intercepted.' His voice dropped – he was saying this with reluctance, Aescarion realised, because he was so unused to telling such important information to a member of the Ecclesiarchy. 'We know that the forces sent to attack any Exterminatus mission will be lead by Castus. Now, in truth, all of our intelligence concerning Castus and most of that concerning Parmenides has come to us indirectly from you. Records from his days in the Ultramarines are next to useless – only you know his mind now.'

Aescarion looked at the Inquisitor slyly. 'You need me?'

The Inquisitor looked at one of his companions, and the silhouette nodded to him. 'Yes, Sister,' he replied. 'We need you.'

'Because only I know how Castus might think.'

'That is not the only reason you are here.' The Inquisitor shifted uneasily in his seat, the servos of his armour whirring. This was not something he wanted to say. 'One of the forces which governs this galaxy, and the Imperium within it, is Fate. It is a strange force which cannot be manipulated, only accepted and worked around.

'Part of the reason the Imperium has endured is because we take Fate into account.' Above the table, the map winked off, leaving only the Inquisitor lit. 'Lesser leaders ignore it, which is why they all eventually fall. In this matter, it is Fate that connects you to Castus. You are a thread running through his life. Without you, he is completely in the thrall of Chaos. But so long as you are alive, there is a link between him and the Imperium that he cannot escape.'

'You were there at the start of this. Fate may well decide that you should be there at the end. This situation may require you to die alongside Castus. I am led to understand that you will accept this.'

Aescarion could feel shadow-hidden eyes examining her. In her mind, she could still see that foul stain of Chaos spreading across the map.

'I could serve my Emperor in no greater fashion,' she said quietly, 'than by

scouring Saafir utterly of the filth which infests it.'



ONCE AGAIN, Castus had changed. Standing there on the bridge of the Chaos vessel, Defixio, Aescarion could see the armour around his barrel chest breathing as he did. Where it had been scored it bled a green, brackish ichor. There were no longer eyes behind the helmet, just a single slash of malevolence. He moved, not like a man clad in armour, but like something wholly biological, primeval and strange.

Castus, for his part, knew that he should recognise her. He had seen her before, more than once, but he could not name her. The face had been younger, certainly, with fewer lines; the eyes brighter, the hair a deeper colour. He recalled dimly that age did these things to humans. But it was definitely the same person, the same black-armoured woman, the same symbol of the flaming chalice embroidered on her white robes. But her name... what was her name? Where had he seen her?

Aescarion had seen this moment a million times in her imagination. All around her lay the shattered wreckage of the Defixio's bridge. The ancient computation banks were torn apart, spilling brass rods and gears onto the floor. The floor and walls were scarred with gunfire. The bodies of the ship's crew lay all around, alongside the mangled corpses of Castus's daemons. Great swathes of daemons' blood were spattered across the walls, and it pooled around the bases of the control consoles, still smoking and bubbling. None had given any quarter, and all had died for their devotion, either to the god of the Plague or to the purity of the Imperium.

Through the great observation port which served for a ceiling, the stars outside marked the fringes of Parmenides's corrupt domain. The warfleet had barely entered the disputed space when the metal fangs of something

alive had burrowed into the Defixio's hull and disgorged a horde of Nurgle's finest. One by one the ships protecting the Defixio had fallen to the same fate, their huge empty hulks drifting lazily through space like bodies in the water. Only the defenders aboard the Defixio had been able to stem the tide, and then only at the expense of their own lives. The two forces had ground each other down in the corridors and engine rooms of the ship, until only two stood.

Aescarion, whose axe blade still smouldered from the blood of a dozen daemons. And Castus, whose morningstar was heavy with gore and whose shield was blistered and slashed. So, as Fate and the Emperor's divine will had decreed, they faced each other once again.

Wearily they began to circle once more, weighing their weapons in their hands. Aescarion knew her chances were slight. She was Castus's match in skill but not strength, and she had none of his toughness. She had faced him twice before, and each time her broken body had needed the attentions of the Orders Hospitaller to heal. And Castus would be a greater warrior than he had ever been. He was wholly Chaotic in form, and lacked the weaknesses of humanity.

But, of course, he had not fought out this duel out in full, in every waking second of his life, as Aescarion had done. She had mapped out the tides of the struggle, every move, every outcome. She had seen how he fought. She knew even before she had moved how he would react. Aescarion brought her axe down towards him. Castus thrust his shield in front of him but she knew he would. She drove the blade into the top edge of the shield and split it clean in two. Blood fountained from the torn panels, the warrior letting out a bestial roar of pain. His morningstar swept in a wide black path but the Seraphim ducked it, slicing upwards into his armoured torso.

The axe's blade slashed again and again, a lightning bolt that struck in a dozen places at once, the energy field tittering the armour so it split and buckled. The wounds were shallow but they were many, for Aescarion knew she could not fell him

with one blow. He had to be ground down, whittled away until he could not resist, with blows his supernatural reflexes could not avoid.

My faith has taken me this far, Aescarion prayed as she sliced and circled the warrior. *Now my hatred will take me through.*

Castus was forced back under her onslaught. For the first time he felt panic welling up through long-dead avenues of his mind. He fell to his knees, the blows battering his head now. The blade of bone lashed into his body, the flesh exposed, the armour falling away in chunks. He fell onto his back, his altered blood spurting all around, his blackened, dead flesh drying and contracting as it was exposed to the air. He waited for the final blow that would break him.

This was a feeling he had felt before, so many years before. This helplessness, being laid open before an enemy. This was what it had been like when his mind was flayed away. His faith blasted from him. His soul laid bare for Parmenides to corrupt. The heart-rending memories of that day bubbled up into his mind from the dark corner of his soul where they had festered, just as he had festered for all of these years. He had not always been as he was now. He had been changed. This woman! She had been there when it happened – and now she had come back.

Aescarion looked down at Castus. He was at her mercy at last. Now came the part that could so easily become undone. The speech she had rehearsed all these years.

'It makes no difference if I kill you now,' she spat. 'You are bound to the Plague God. If you die, your soul will join a billion others in damnation. If I let you live, you might wait a thousand years more, and by then you will have no mind left to care what happens to my species. Parmenides offered you knowledge. Now you have it, from me. You have seen both sides of reality – you have served both the Imperium and Chaos. But there is one thing you don't know, one fragment of experience you have not claimed. You do not know how it would feel to become righteous again.'

Castus looked up at her. He knew that he would not live for long, not with his stagnant blood running so freely onto the floor. He stared up at her lined face, and the strands of grey in the hair that he had once seen burning above him.

'You are old,' he whispered through his time-ravaged throat. 'I did not realise it had been so long.'

Aescarion switched off her axe's energy field. The air fell still. 'You have all the knowledge you ever will. You are stronger than any man alive, than any Space Marine I have ever known of. But is it enough? It cannot get any better, Castus. It will only get worse. It might take thousands of years, but it will get so much worse.'

Castus felt his life draining away. He knew well, by now, the ways of death. He had minutes, not years. The words of this woman would not leave his mind. He had thrown everything he had believed in away to be one with the blessed Plague God. Surely he could not return?

Aescarion was virtually unarmed now, but she knew Castus was harmless. Even if he wasn't dying, his thoughts were keeping him docile. There was a war going on in his mind of a kind she knew so well. 'You may think that you cannot be forgiven, that you can never be a part of humanity again. But there is more than one path to redemption.'

More than one path. There is always another way. Castus had walked two paths in his life. He had abandoned one. Could he do it again, with the time he had left?

'Look what the years have done to us both,' Aescarion continued. 'They turned you into an animal. They forced my faith away from the commands of my Order. But all that time has let me come to see that whatever happens here, you will never have the chance to change the galaxy again.'

'You have an imagination. Use it. Change your path once more before you draw your last breath.'

THE SICKENING FLASH brought him back into the cavern, returning him to the very place where his new life had begun, so long ago. The Chaos champion struggled, but struggled in victory. His steps were laboured as he dragged his bleeding bulk along the promontory once more to his position above the roiling face of the Daemon Prince.

'Cactus, my boy!' Parmenides had been waiting for his servant's return. 'I see it has been a taxing task I set you. But are you victorious?'

Castus nodded slowly, his last reservoir of energy draining dry.

'The Exterminatus? Is it averted?'

'Better... better than that,' Castus croaked. 'It is... unnecessary.'

The face reared up in its slow tidal wave, a mile-wide frown furrowing the cascade of reeking flesh. 'Meaning what, my servant?'

Castus pulled himself up to his full height. With the force of sheer will he unclenched his altered hands. The fingers reluctantly peeled away, the crystal splitting, the morningstar falling from his grip and spiralling down into the corrupt sea.

He spread those fingers and, with what little strength he had left, plunged them into his breastplate. The metal split along the lines which Aescarion's axe had scored, laying open the diseased torso which had been enclosed since he first set foot on Saafir.

The dead organs had been hollowed out and the rotting loops of viscera were gone. Now in his distended ribcage there hung a slim metal cylinder, harmless in appearance – until the Daemon Prince's psychic sight perceived the gothic letters inscribed upon it:

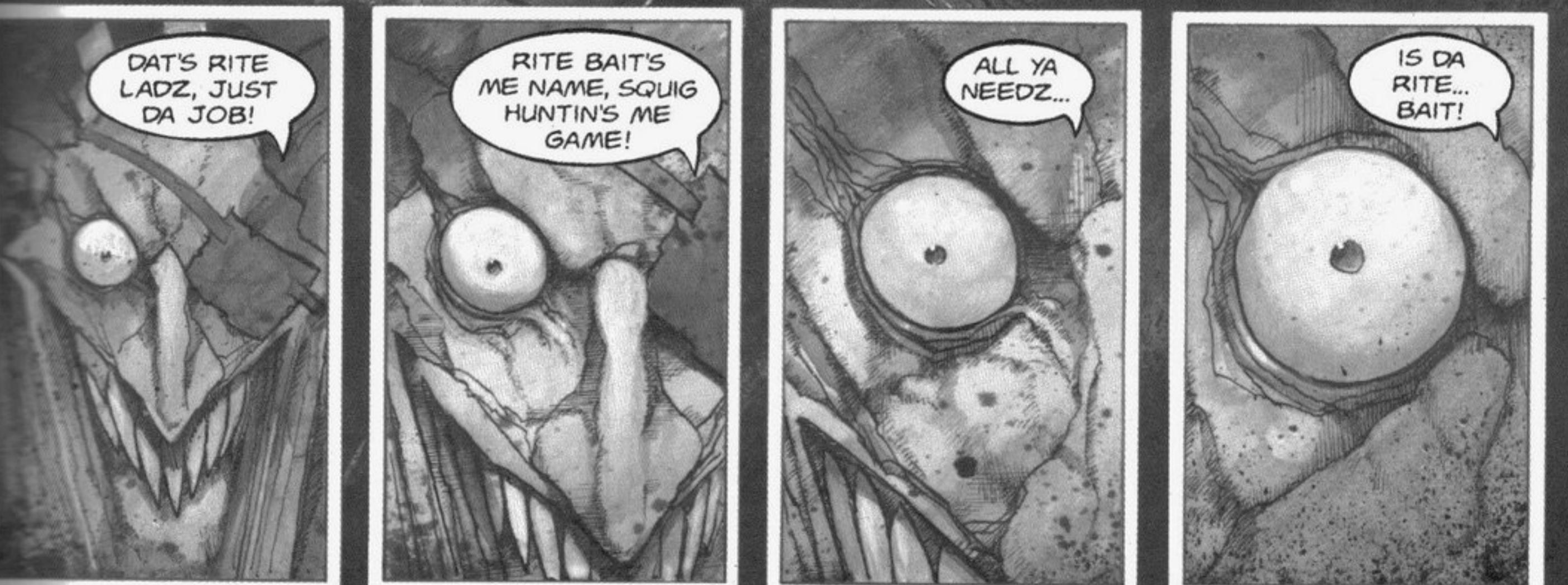
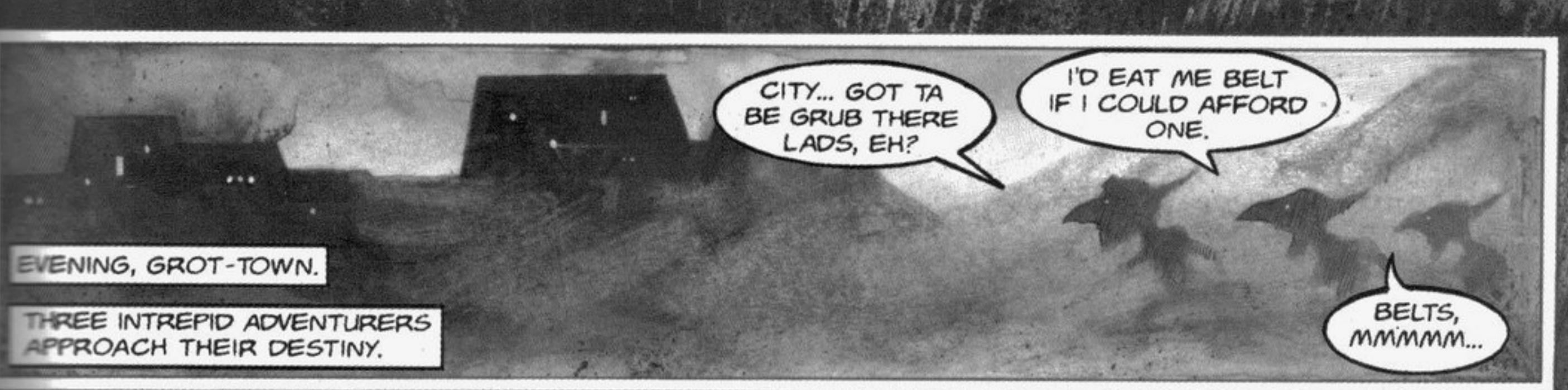
IN EXTERMINATUS EXTREMIS.

DOMINA, SALVE NOS.

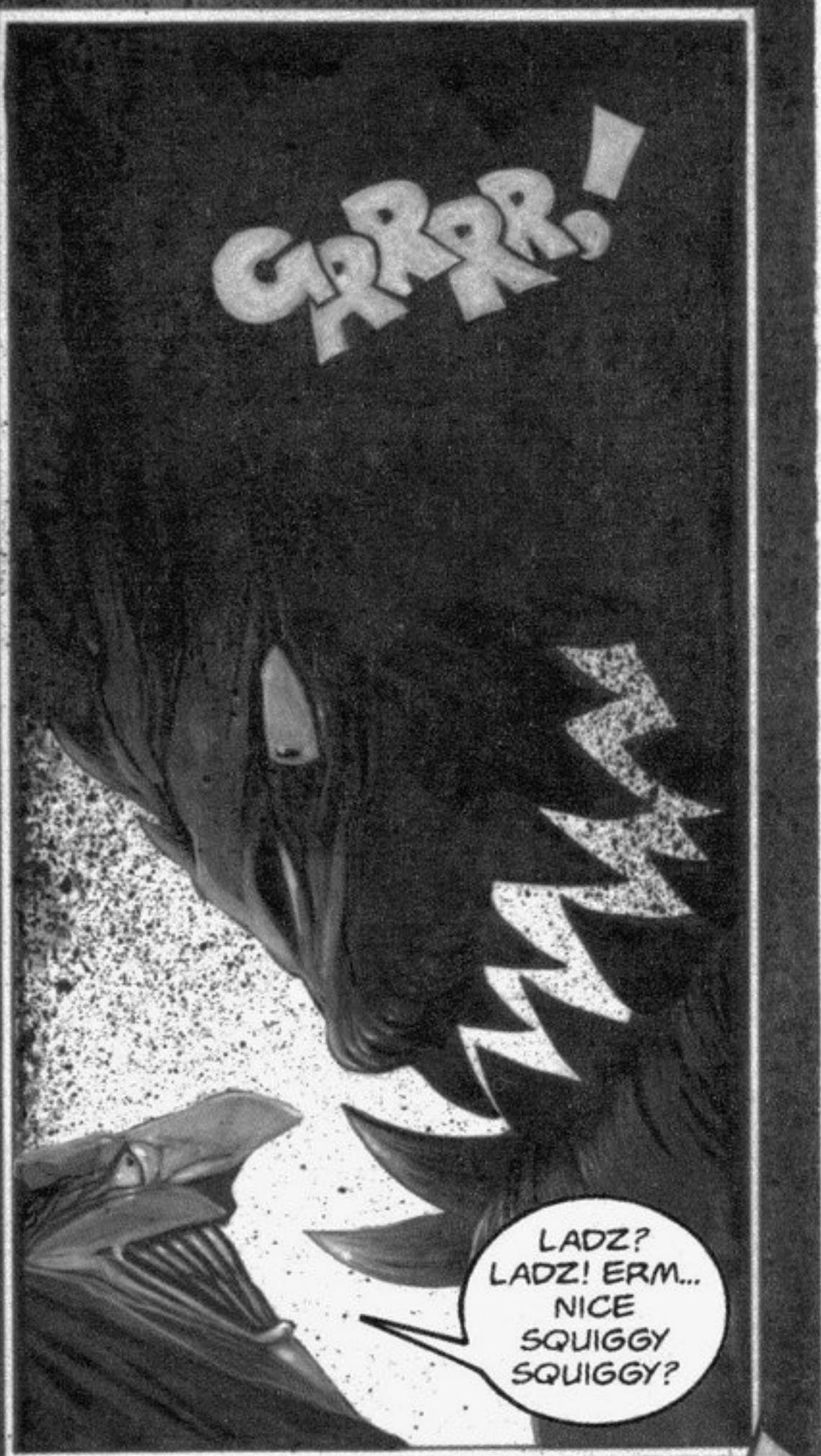
Sergeant Castus of the Ultramarines looked Parmenides the Vile in the eye, and tasted joyfully the fear he saw there.

'*Damnatio tuum,*' he whispered, and the white light of purity blasted him clean for all eternity. ●











SNIKKEINGCRUNCH!



YEAH! JUS JUMP DOWN AN DISTRAKT IT. I'LL SMAKK IT WITH ME TENDERIZA!

GRRRRR!

SLEEPY?!

IT DON'T LOOK SLEEPY!?

LADZ, LADZ,
DONCHA TRUST
OLD RITE BAIT? I'M
DA EXPERT, SEE?

YEAH? YOU'RE A
ZOGGIN FRUITCAKE,
DAT'S WOT YOU ARE,
MATE!

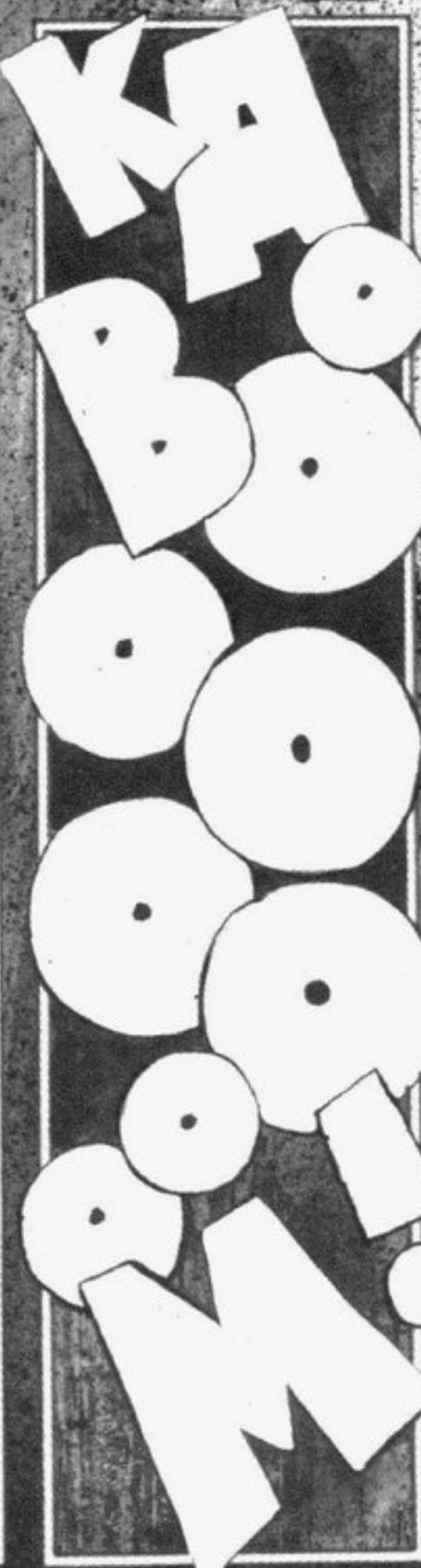
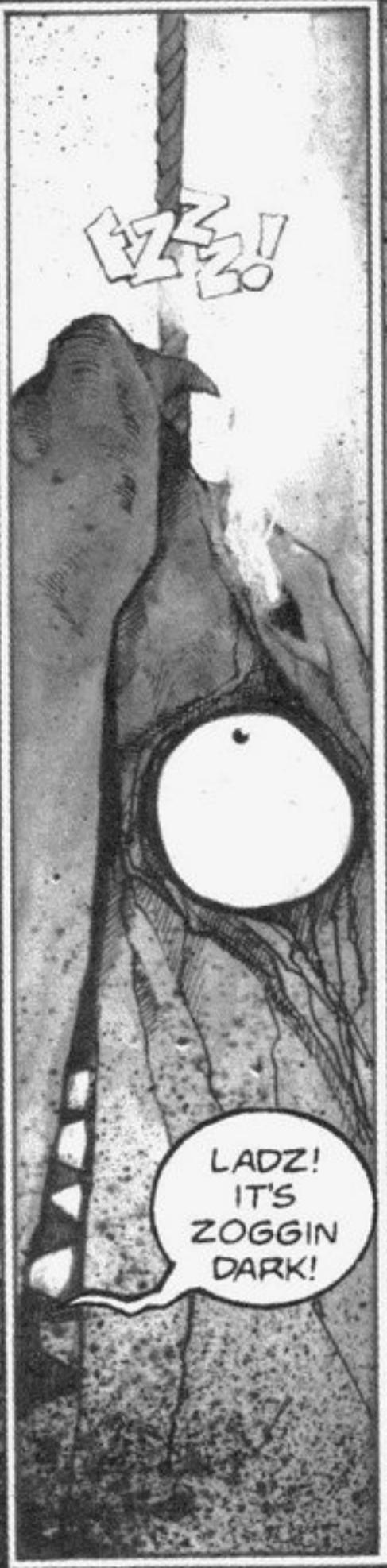
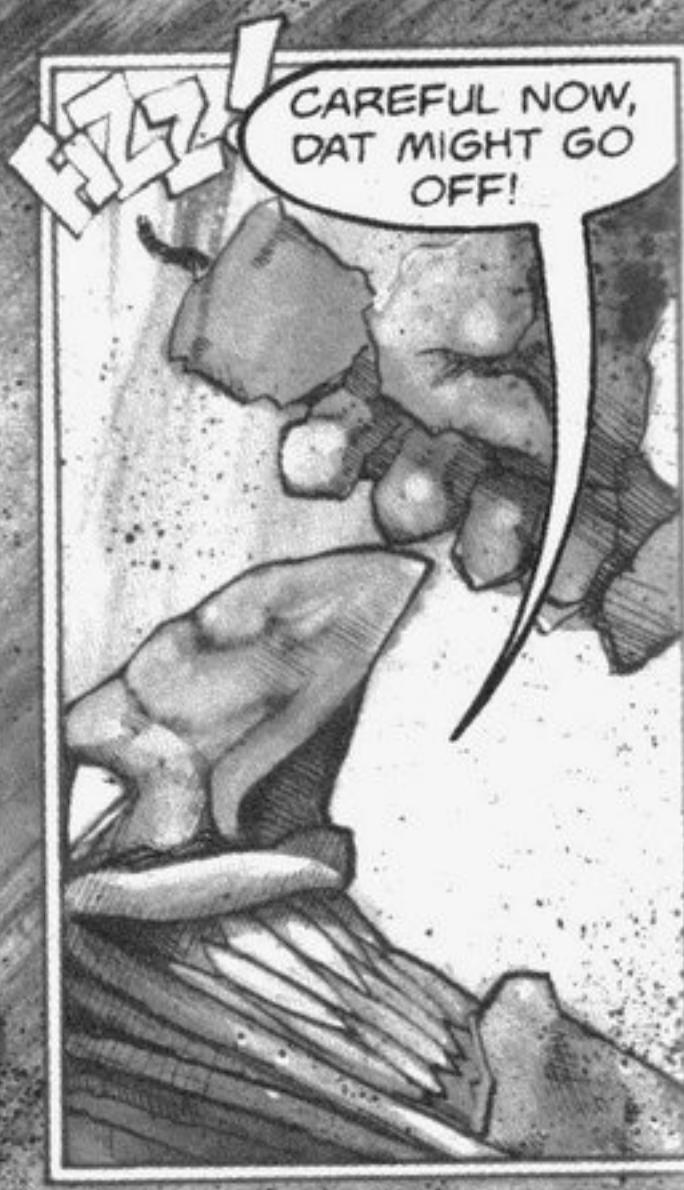
LOOK, I'VE BIN
LINTIN SQUIGS FER
EVER. ALL YEZ
NEEDS IS A GOOD
PLAN-AND DA RITE
BAIT!

MMMM, PLAN EH?
NOW YOU GOT ME
FINKIN...

WOTCHOO
LOOKIN AT ME
LIKE DAT FOR,
LADZ?

I'VE GOT
A PLAN!

BKICK!
KICK
COY RIP
DOGE!
BOOT! KICK
BOOT! BOO



THE END



LAST CHANGERS

DELIVERANCE

BY GAV THORPE

ARAGA STOOD UPON the crest of the hill, leaning on his spearstaff, and looked out across the savannah. The rolling grasslands stretched for miles in every direction, a yellow sea swaying gently in the wind, broken only by the occasional tree or rocky outcrop. On the horizon he could make out the darker green of the jungle canopy.

The tribesman took out a red-coloured root from an animal skin pouch around his neck and began to chew it. As he crushed the root between his teeth, he felt its juices spreading their effect across his body, loosening the ties between mortal flesh and spirit. His limbs began to go numb and he felt his mind ready itself for the journey to the world of the gods. He looked vaguely up into the yellow sky, his gaze attracted by movement.

From out of the heavens dropped a star, rapidly falling towards Araga, straight as an arrow towards the ridge. This was an omen, but Araga was not sure if it was good or ill. For almost a hundred heartbeats the tribesman watched the object growing larger and larger, until it impacted into the ground at the base of the hill in a shower of mud and dust. It looked like a gigantic egg, made of thick leathery skin and ribbed bone plates. As Araga watched, the egg cracked open, its upper half peeling apart like a grotesque flower. There was a spray of purplish ichor, and a large, gangling shape flopped from the star-egg onto the ground.

The shape stretched itself up to its full height, the fluids of its cocoon dripping from its body. It was over twice Araga's height, and as it stood on two thick legs it unfolded four upper limbs, two of them wicked-looking claws over a man's height in length. Its purplish flesh was protected by overlapping chitinous plates, and powerful muscle and sinew rippled under its dark skin.

Araga's heart began beating faster and faster and he felt cold sweat prickling all over his body, making him shiver uncontrollably as the creature looked

around, seeming to sniff the air. With a sudden snap of its monstrous insect head, the beast fixed its hellish glare on Araga, snaring him in the gaze of its red eyes. With a pace startling for its size, the star-beast bounded up the slope, its forelimbs ripping at the earth to increase its speed.

Araga found himself transfixed, unable to move or shout. He realised this must be one of the creatures from beyond the Void which the newcomers had warned his people about, a predator from beyond the distant stars which had come for his soul.

As the monster sped towards him, Araga felt something nagging at the back of his mind, and realised he could hear a rumbling from off to his right. He wanted to look but could not tear his eyes away from the demon of destruction racing towards him. The creature was only a few great strides away from Araga, its claws arching back to deliver the killing attack.

Without warning, a lightning storm of light lashed into the Void Demon, blasting it sprawling to the ground, its limbs flailing wildly. Snapped out of the beast's hypnotic spell, Araga spun to see metal creatures advancing along the ridge, spitting fire at the monstrous intruder. The Sky Spirits had arrived to save him!



THE NATIVE JUST keeps on staring dumbly at us as we open fire again. I guess it ain't that surprising, considering that to these guys a simple mono-edged knife is a creation of the gods. Dumb locals, if they weren't so stupid they'd be able to fend for themselves and we wouldn't be here risking our necks to protect them. My attention's distracted away from him when the Lictor gets to its feet again and the Chimeras have to fire another volley into the creature. I order the rest of the platoon to take up firing positions, keeping up a steady stream of las bolts as we advance. The Lictor then leaps at Franx's squad, but even as it races

towards them, hissing like some damned Oviran cobra, they tear it apart with their lasguns and heavy bolter. It kind of collapses in on itself, those huge killing claws folding over its body.

I walk up to make sure it's truly dead. You can never tell with these fragging Tyranids. Some of them have got powers of regeneration you wouldn't believe. Its dark blood is spattered all over the thin grass, and it certainly looks like a corpse. To make sure, I level my laspistol at its head and fire six shots.

'Okay, Last Chancers!' I call to my platoon. 'Mount up and move out!'

Some of them begin to walk back to the Chimera transports, but Franx, Letts and some others walk over to where I'm standing. It's Letts who speaks first.

'We've been thinking, Kage. We've got the perfect opportunity here. I mean, we've got a great chance to get the hell out of this fragging outfit, once and for all.'

I look at them, not knowing what they mean. 'What've you got in mind?'

'Well,' Franx says, 'it's two leagues to the jungles. The Colonel would never find us in there, and there's plenty of food to forage, shelter, everything we need to survive. We just have to turn the Chimeras south and we're free men again.'

His eyes are intense now beneath his thick curls of hair, and he takes another step forward.

'Think of it!' he continues. 'No more Last Chancers! No more fragging suicide missions for the Colonel. No more spending every minute wondering what of a thousand kinds of hell we're going to end up in next. Free men, Lieutenant, free men!'

I can hardly believe it. I've been fighting with Franx for a year, and Letts has been with the XIIIth Penal Legion for twice as long. Like me, like all the Last Chancers, they were thrown out of their regular units for breaking the Imperial Guard's rules in a big way, to serve the rest of their lives in a penal legion. We've walked across a dozen battlefields together, in the worst fighting you can imagine. We've been through them all – suicide assaults,

rearguard actions and any other no-hope situation you can think of. It takes more than guts and brawn to survive for that long and I can't believe they're being so stupid now.

'What kind of fraggin' scheme is that?' I snap, and their jaws drop. Franx starts getting angry, and I can see the blood rushing to his face. He's gonna start trouble if I don't do something right now.

'Look, boys,' I say, trying to calm them down, 'you haven't thought this through, really. There's a Tyranid hive ship up there, full of specially evolved killing machines, all hungering to eat you up as soon as look at you. The only reason the sky isn't full of mycetic spores yet is 'cause we've managed to pick off the Lictors before they found Deliverance, so they ain't sure where to commit their forces.'

'But it's just a stalling action, 'cause we can't get them all, no way – and even if we could, as soon as they find out there's more Imperial transports on the way, they'll send every bio-engineered little fragger they've got onto the planet.'

'So the way I see it, you've got two choices. There's your plan, which means hanging around in the open, I know it's jungle but they'll still find you when they come down, and then what kind of chance are you gonna have? Or, you can come back with me to Deliverance, where there's a big wall to hide behind, three hundred more Last Chancers, the Battle Sisters and two thousand natives to help us fight. Your choice, but if you ain't going my way I'm gonna have to insist you go on foot. The Colonel would skin me if I let you take the Chimeras. It's only midday, so you've got eight hours walking to sundown, plenty of time for you to hole up and wait for the damn Tyranids to come.'

I see realisation dawning on their faces like the sun breaking out from behind a cloud. I thought I'd taught them better than this, but it just goes to show that some people never learn anything unless they get taught the hard way. Unfortunately, when you're in the Last Chancers, most people who learn the hard way are food for the worms.

They don't say anything, they just turn around and start walking back to the Chimeras. I take one last look at the Lictor, just to be safe. It's strange, 'cause any other type of cadaver would be crawling with flesh-ants on this damn planet by now, and there'd be a flock of carrion birds circling overhead. But there's nothing; not even the bugs will touch a Tyranid. Frag, of all the things in this galaxy, those fraggers make my skin crawl the most.



SO WE FINISH the firesweep, and I'm back in Deliverance, debriefing with the Colonel in the central keep. I can see the rest of the missionary station out of the window, the mid-afternoon sun blazing down fiercely. It's not big, little more than a large village really, half a mile across, with a large central compound, some scattered buildings, and of course this keep, which doubles as an Ecclesiarchy shrine. I can see the men walking sentry on the curtain wall and even at this distance I reckon I can feel their tension.

'Kage!' Colonel Schaeffer barks, and I snap back from the outside world. There's him, me and the other two Lieutenants – Green and Kronin.

'As I was saying,' the Colonel continues pointedly, 'we've had a contact with the relief force. They are no more than two days away. If we can hold for just forty-eight hours, there will be two whole regiments of Imperial Guard. The wall should be fairly straightforward to defend. It is eighteen feet high, so we just have to worry about their Hormagaunts and Lictors leaping straight up it; the others we can pick off as they climb up the walls. That leaves only the gate, but that is flanked by two towers with emplaced autocannons, and we can park a Chimera behind the gates themselves to make it harder to force. Any questions?'

Kronin clears his throat nervously and wipes a hand through the thin hair

plastered across his scalp. He's a skinny man, kind of jittery in my experience. Emperor alone knows how he had the guts to have his squad incinerate an Imperial temple after stealing the artefacts inside. Even more of surprise is that the Ecclesiarchy didn't demand his head on a pole and his entrails decorating the roadway.

'What about Gargoyles, sir?' Kronin asks.

'No problem,' the Colonel assures us. He's ice cold, as usual, as calm as if we weren't going to be fighting for our damned lives in a few days, perhaps even in the next few hours. As always, he's wearing his full dress uniform, clean shaven like he was fresh out of the barracks.

He's a big man, physically I mean, but there's more to him than that. Those cold blue eyes and his own force of will make him seem twice as tall as anyone around. I wouldn't call it 'charisma', 'cause he's a uncommunicative and surly man. He just has this sheer presence that fills the room.

'We have two Hydras and this keep has four point-defence emplacements. If anything tries flying over the walls, we have the firepower to gun them down. In any case, Kage and his platoon are acting as mobile reserve behind the walls. If the Tyranids get a breakthrough at the walls or gates, or we get some unexpected visitors dropping down, he'll move in and bolster the defence. Anything else?'

I glance out of the window again and see the sunlight glittering off highly polished armour, which makes me think of something.

'The Sisters. What's the deal there?' I ask, already knowing the answer.

The Adepta Sororitas are under Ministorum authority, so we have no direct control over their actions. I have spoken to the Sister Superior in charge and outlined our plan. I am sure they will play their part. The same applies to the levies. They will be manning the walls, and we will concentrate our guns around the gatehouse. That is where the fighting will be fiercest.

'If you need to see me, that's where you'll find me.'

No surprise there, then. The Colonel is always in the roughest of the fighting, and he always walks out too. Emperor alone knows what makes him do it. We're here because we did wrong, and got caught. But him? What did he do wrong? I mean, what kind of man would choose to lead an Imperial Guard penal legion? What kind of mind do you need to walk into so many situations where you must be blessed by the Emperor to ever take another breath again, and then march straight out and into the next one? He must be mad, I mean seriously insane.

They say he spends his time on board ship practising ways to kill himself in the event that he's wounded. I take it back about the Tyranids. There are some things which are a hell of a lot more scary, because they're in human form. That's what they say he is, a devil in human form, and when he's ready for a fight like now, and you look into his eyes like I'm doing now, you can believe it.



T'S ABOUT NOON the day after and the Tyranids have found us. Maybe a Lictor slipped through the net, which wouldn't be surprising considering that for a big brute they can be really sneaky. They can sniff you out ten miles downwind, and they're covered in scales which shift colour so that you can't see them. Or maybe the 'Nids just got fed up with waiting and decided to come and get us, wherever we are.

I stood on the wall last night and watched the spores dropping down. Scary sight, believe me. It was like ten meteor storms all at once, these falling stars coming down, wave after wave of them. There's an old saying: *If you see a shooting star you can offer a prayer to the Emperor and he'll grant it.*

Well, with all of those flaming stars that's one hell of a lot of prayers to be delivered on, but I decided to use them all in one go, for one big, huge prayer to the Emperor. Do you want to know what

I prayed for? I prayed that those shooting stars would stop coming down. But they didn't, so I guess a murderer like me hasn't got the right to pray to the Emperor anymore, which is why I'm here fighting now, serving Him in the only way I know.

Frag, being here, in this missionary station with all these Ecclesiarchy types, it must be having an affect on me. I mean, I know the Emperor's our Lord and is watching over us, but I've always figured that those of us who can, have to watch out for ourselves, 'cause he's there to watch out for those who can't watch out for themselves. Just like we're here to defend the tribes people from the Tyranids, 'cause all they've got are crappy knives and spears and brave warrior hearts, which is all well and good if you're fighting amongst yourselves, but against the Tyranids is going to be about as effective as trying to stop a Sabre shell from blowing you away by holding up your hands.

But I guess, when you've stood there for an hour and watched your doom come down out of the stars in a constant flow, it'd be nice to know that if this is the time when it goes wrong and you end up with your guts torn out on a Lictor's flesh hooks, or some Hormagaunt stabs those dagger-talons through your chest, it ain't really the end, that there's someone waiting for you and it wasn't all a waste of time.

I know I've got to ditch these morbid thoughts. Got to stay sharp, otherwise this is gonna be my final trip with the Last Chancers. It's hard though, so hard, 'cause I was there on Ichar Four, I saw what they can do to a world, how they fight. There were six thousand Last Chancers back then. Less than five hundred of us made it out. The regular troops, I hear, lost over a million men defending Ichar Four.

There were Titans there, and Space Marines too, if the rumours are true, and even those Eldar turned up, I heard someone say once. All those guns, all those men and we only just won the fight. I've seen so much blood and guts spilled in my life I don't have nightmares any

more, but if there's one thing that would give me nightmares, it's Tyranids. They're just so different to us. Even Orks fight for territory and conquest, but the Tyranids, they just consume everything, like they're here to wipe out every single living thing in the entire galaxy and they'll never, ever stop until that's done.

Which is why I was stood up on the wall last night, in the freezing wind – you'd never guess that it could be so hot in the day and so cold at night – watching them coming down. Watching my doom come, 'cause I've got a seriously bad feeling about this one. The hairs on my neck prickle constantly and I feel like I'm dead already, it's just my body that's gotta catch up with the plan.

Which is why I'm standing there hoping there really is an Emperor, that he listens to our prayers and comes to our aid. But I can't count on that, which is why I'm here now as the sun starts dipping towards the jungles, ready to fight like I've never had to fight before, ready to do anything I can, because death is stalking across those plains right now.



THE MAIN ASSAULT wave has hit the walls. The sun's low on the horizon and they attack from that direction to blind us. The Colonel was right about the Gargoyles, our air defences were more than a match. About a hundred of them came flying in, diving down onto the fort. The guns opened up, blowing them out of the sky. Some managed to get over the walls, and then the Hydras got them, firing high explosive shells into the broods, blasting them apart. That was horrible, pieces of bloodied and charred meat dropping down on you like obscene hailstones. No time to clear up the mess, though, 'cause the rest of the swarm has just arrived. It's hard to tell what's going on from back where we are in reserve, a couple of hundred paces from the wall.

We've cleared ourselves a killing zone, demolishing the buildings inside the

perimeter and using them to make a redoubt around the keep, so that if the Tyranids get inside we've got a second firing line. Most of the action seems to be going off around the gatehouse, just like the Colonel said it would. The men are three ranks deep on the walls on the south side, while the Battle Sisters are holding the west wall. There's about half as many of the Sororitas as there are Last Chancers but they seem to be holding out better than we are. Then again, give me a bolt gun and power armour and I'd show you just how mean and nasty a Last Chancer can get.

It's about a quarter of an hour since the attack begun when the Tyranids get their first breakthrough. I'm watching the eastern end of the south wall when I see a horde of Termagants running around and I realise there's nobody else up that end anymore.

'Okay, Last Chancers! Time to die!' I bellow as usual, and then we're running across the killing ground towards the wall, fast as we can. The gunners in the Chimeras take the hint and suddenly there's a fusillade of heavy bolter fire and multilaser shots directed at the Termagants. Thirty heart-pounding seconds later and we're leaping up the steps, snapping off shots with our lasguns as we close in. The supporting fire from the Chimeras stops as we reach the top and suddenly I'm surrounded by the creatures.

I see one of them levelling its living gun at me and just manage to take it down before it can fire. All of a sudden, they charge at us, and I rip my chainsword from my belt and get the blades whirling, while the others make ready with their bayonets. The Termagants are biting and clawing at everything in their path, and I'd swear they were mindless if it wasn't for the co-ordinated fashion of their attack. As they sweep around me I feel like I'm going to get washed away in the wave, and panic hits me, bile rising out of my stomach as I see those fanged, nightmarish faces all around me. One of the Termagants leaps at me, its four upper limbs drawn back ready to attack, but I bring the chainsword round and the

blades crash through its carapace, sending thick, alien blood spattering across my face. It tastes foul and I'm almost sick with the stench of it. I put a shot through the bulbous head of another one and then something hits me hard in the back. This thing is latched onto me, and I can't get at it. I feel its claws scrabbling at my flak jacket, hear the material tearing away, and its hot breath is on my neck, a long pointed tongue slithering over my neck. Its jaws latch onto my shoulder and I try to angle my laspistol round for a shot, desperately trying to rip this beast off of me, 'cause I don't want to be killed by some damned Termagant. I'm not going to go like this, not like this.

Before it gets the killing blow in, Truko is there, one of Franx's squad, his bayonet skewering the Termagant, and I feel it let go and drop to the floor. There's no time to thank him, though, as he gets thrown to the ground, half his face ripped off by a vicious claw. The creature is hunched over him, all six limbs on the ground ready to spring, and its red eyes turn to look up at me. I shoot its legs from beneath it then drive the chainsword into its soft, unprotected guts. Truko's screaming, wailing his head off, but there's no time to give him peace. No rest for the wicked, as they say.

We push them back, inch by bloody inch, to the edge of the wall. I see Franx pick one of them up and hurl it bodily over the parapet, its limbs and tail still flailing around even as it plummets down. I look over the edge of the wall, and I see how they managed to get up. A pile of their bodies stretches two-thirds of the way up the wall, almost ten feet high, body upon body upon body, creating a ramp of corpses for the others to run up.

'Grenades! Blow those bodies away from the wall!' I shout, even as I dodge aside to avoid a barbed tail lashing towards my throat. My chainsword bites again, making an ear-piercing screech as it shrieks through chitinous plates. The others heard me, though, and they're tossing frag grenades over the parapet, trying to dislodge the fleshy pile. I see Marshall standing atop the wall, gripping his lasrifle by the barrel and swinging it

from side to side like a club, battering away at the brood as it scuttles up towards us. The grenades blossom, sending bits of torn flesh flying, and something gives. The pile of bodies slides outwards along the walls, falling to the ground leaving smears of blood along the rockcrete.

Then the Termagants are falling back, away from the wall. But things aren't over yet, there's something else coming towards us, coming at us real fast. With long flea-like leaps and bounds the Hormagaunts speed in, almost flying over the litter of corpses leading up to the wall. We're trying to shoot as many of them as possible as they close in, but there's still twenty, maybe thirty of them when they get to the base of the wall. They stop there for half a heartbeat, bunching those powerful leg muscles and then they spring up, clearing the wall by a good two or three feet, those four deadly dagger-talons jabbing out.

One of them punches its claw into Marshall's shoulder and he grabs its arm in one hand, holding it close. He wraps his other arm around the throat of another as it tries to push past, and then throws himself off the wall, taking them both with him. A serrated claw sweeps up towards my groin, but I manage to get there with the chainsword, lopping off the limb, my laspistol scoring a hit through one of its glassy red eyes. The rest of the fight just blurs into a waking nightmare of hacking and slashing and stabbing, kicking and shooting, punching and screaming, bestial faces and hot breath, flailing talons and ripping claws, blood and filth and guts slick across the walkway, a constant fight until your arms are leaden with fatigue and your brain can't process the information anymore, you're just fighting from instinct and nothing else.



gatehouse and spreads along the wall. I let my men cheer along as well, though we've got little to celebrate. The shock of the close call with the Termagant is beginning to creep up on me and I look around for something to do to keep my mind occupied and not thinking about how close I came to going down this time. I see the Colonel striding along the walkway towards me, his face as grim as ever. I've never seen him break into a smile, not once.

'Kage! Clear away the dead. I'm sending flamer teams to clear the front of the wall.' Then he's gone again, issuing orders, getting the wounded divided into those that can fight and those that need to be given the Emperor's grace. That's it, no thanks, no 'Well done, Kage: you held the wall'. Just more orders, more work, more fighting and dying to be done. I detail some of my men to start throwing the bodies over the parapet, and see that the flamer teams are already at work, jets of fire turning the piles into pyres. I leave them to their dirty work and seek out the Colonel.

I find him outside the keep, talking to Nathaniel, the missionary in charge of the station. They seem to be arguing about something.

'But these men need treating, you cannot make them fight again,' Nathaniel's complaining.

'If these men cannot fight, they are dead, missionary. We need every single man we can have for the walls,' the Colonel replies in that low, grating voice of his. It's the first time I've had a chance to get a proper look at him since the fight began. His uniform is soaked in blood, alien and human, but none of it appears to be his. There's not a scratch on his skin, not a fragging scratch. My spine goes to ice and I try not to think about it.

Nathaniel's still arguing, but the Colonel holds up his hand to stop him.

'These men do not deserve your pity,' he says, his eyes flashing like sun on ice. 'They are thieves, murderers, looters, rapists, insubordinates and heretics. Every sin you can conceive of has been committed by at least one man here.'

WE MANAGE TO stave off the assault and as the Tyranids fall back across the plain a cheer starts up by the

More than that, they are traitors. They once served as free men in the great Imperial army. But they betrayed the trust placed in them by the Emperor and his servants. They have broken the proscriptions of Imperial Law and have profaned the Emperor's benevolence with their selfishness and I will, I must, punish them for it.'

'Only the Emperor can judge our sins,' argues Nathaniel.

'And only in death can we receive the Emperor's judgement,' the Colonel completes the catechism. Nathaniel takes a long look at him, then turns away.

'Remember, Nathaniel,' the Colonel calls after him, 'serve the Emperor today, for tomorrow you may be dead!' And then, just for an instant, a tiny fraction of a second, there's a ghost of a smile on Colonel Schaeffer's lips, a minuscule hint of satisfaction, like he knows something the rest of the galaxy doesn't.

'Kage!' he calls, like he must have sensed I was there, beckoning me over with a finger. 'As I am sure you know, that was just the first assault. I do not know when the next one will come, so stay ready. It is only an hour until the sun goes down, so I think they will wait until nightfall. I want you and your platoon to stay near the gate. This first attack was just to test out our defences, to count our guns. They know we were most hard-pressed around the gate, so they'll throw the bulk of their forces there next time.'

'We must hold the gate at all costs, Kage, otherwise it's all over. Stay close to the gate, but wait for my signal. Do not, at any costs, allow yourself to get drawn away from the gate. Is that clear?'

'Perfectly, sir!' I reply, as if I couldn't see the scenario for myself. This time we just faced Gargoyles, Termagants and Hormagaunts. They're all expendable troops. Next time, it'll be much worse. They'll come in with the Warriors, the Carnifexes, and maybe even the big bug himself, the Hive Tyrant.

'You have your orders then, Lieutenant. Snap to it, I want clear fire for everyone in half an hour.' Then he's off again, shouting for Green and Kronin.

THE COLONEL WAS RIGHT, as I knew he would be. Emperor take him, but he's always so damned right.

Nightfall comes sharply, the Tyranids waiting us out for the moment. I help Kronin's platoon rig up some searchlights scavenged from the Chimeras and get them set up on the wall. The constant hum of the portable generators fills the air, but listening won't do us any good, 'cause those Tyranids can move as silent as you like when they want to. That's one of the scariest things about them – the silence. No battlecries, no war chants, just waves of them sweeping on towards you. When they're fighting, they hiss a lot, but I doubt if they've got any real language to speak of. They're just animals, bugs, but they're well organised for all that. They're like the wasps I saw on Antreides, who seemed to know what each other were up to. When one of them found you, the rest would soon come buzzing in, just like the Lictors finding the prey for the rest of the swarm.

So I'm up on the wall checking everything is okay, when the searchlights blaze on at last. The stupid grunts start angling them far away from the wall, like they want to get the earliest warning possible, which I can understand. Problem is, the light doesn't hit the ground before it's too weak to show anything.

I grab the nearest one and point it further down, about seventy yards out. I catch a glimmer of movement and shout for the others to train on that point. What I see makes my spine tingle with fear. A sensation, I might add, that I'm not all that familiar with, though far too familiar for my own liking. There's a big brood of Termagants out there, crawling through the grass on their bellies, sneaking really close. Behind them are crouched the Warriors, big beasts twice as tall as a man, their four upper limbs evolved into a variety of deadly ranged and close combat weapons. They're creeping forward, bony joints and chitinous plates shown up in the white glare of the searchlights.

The light glitters off their eyes, countless shining orbs reflected back at me. Those

eyes seem dead, there's no emotion, nothing. Not even a touch of hunger, which is what you'd expect considering that this race devours whole planets. No, the only eyes I've ever seen colder than those white-fire stares are Colonel Schaeffer's, and we all know he's not really human.

'Mark your targets! Open fire!' I bellow. I see them opening up, first with the missile launchers and autocannons and then with volleys of lasgun fire as the 'Nids realise the game's up and they rise out of the grass and charge towards us, a wave of multi-limbed monstrosities intent on our destruction. I take one last look as they come streaming over the plain, blossoms of fire exploding in their mist, showing up their snarling faces in brief glimpses of hellfire, before jumping down the steps three at a time to get back to my platoon.

'Right, men,' I tell them, 'stay steady. Follow my lead, stay tight. If you get separated, they'll pick you off, no problem. When you shoot, aim for the flesh. Your lasguns will have about as much effect on their carapace as punching a Leman Russ. Watch your ammo counters too, 'cause tonight's gonna be a long haul and I don't want to face those fraggin' bugs with just my bare hands.'

'One final thing: don't get yourselves killed, 'cause otherwise I'm gonna have to put up with another fresh draft of no-hopers. If you let me go down, sure as hell I'm gonna make sure I come back and haunt you for the rest of your miserable lives, reminding you just what a bunch of fraggin' slack-jawed sons of Orks you are!'

That gets a smile. Personally, I couldn't give a frag about all this pre-battle speech crap, but some of them need it, I can tell. Just like me, they're getting awful nervous. I mean, they're a bunch of hard-nosed, thick-skinned meatheads for the most part, but even when you've got nothing but air between your ears you can't get over the unreasoning horror that the Tyranids bring out in you. It's not just like they kill you. They devour you, take everything you are, everything you ever

were gonna be, and change it and pervert it into something else. It's a horrible thought, I don't mind telling you.

The fire's still pretty steady from the top of the wall, so I guess we're holding out okay. I give myself the luxury of watching the Battle Sisters for a while, fighting alongside the natives. It's a really bizarre scene, I can tell you. You have a thousand or so of those dark-skinned warriors, hurling spears and firing bows, their skin glistening with sweat, their booming war chants echoing down from the wall. And then there's the Sororitas. They're chanting too, their voices raised in constant prayer to the Emperor, a choir all singing as one. I can't make out the words, but it reaches inside me, lifting my spirits. It's a song of defiance and devotion, and as they sing they fire methodical bursts from their bolters, fusillade after fusillade pouring into the darkness, every round sending a streak of light into the shadows from its internal propellant.

Then I see a swathe of the natives jumping in all directions, screaming like mad, clawing at their faces and chests. That'd be a deathspitter then; fires some kind of explosive bug that sprays acid all over the place. Burn through near enough anything, given time, and against the exposed flesh of the native irregulars it's utterly lethal. Dragging my eyes away from the scene, trying to turn a deaf ear to their agonised screeches, I watch what's happening around the gatehouse.

There's hand-to-hand fighting going on now, and I pick out the Colonel, a glowing power sword in one fist and a bolt pistol in the other. While the others are desperately hacking and slaying, he's just stepping to and fro, felling a foe with every blow or shot, as if the chaos going on around wasn't happening at all. I see the shape of a Lictor rise up behind him, but he just turns on the spot, fills its face full of bolts and then chops its legs from underneath it with two swings of the power sword. Calm as you like, as if he were just taking a stroll in the morning airs. Damn, but he's so cold, it makes the Battle Sisters seem positively emotional, and the glance they reserve for scum like

us would freeze worse than a night on Valhalla.

Then something appears on the western gatehouse that almost makes me swallow my tongue in terror. Silhouetted against the rising moon is the figure of the Hive Tyrant. It's almost three times as tall as the men around it. Two arms are moulded into some kind of massive living gun, while the other two end in a whip-like protrusion and a serrated bonesword. A thick tail lashes between its legs, tipped with a sting the size of your arm. Mandibles that can chew a man in two snap hungrily in its jaw and its body is covered in chitinous armour and bony protrusions.

It fires the venom cannon into the packed mass on the gatehouse, blasting apart Guardsmen and Tyranids alike. Its head stretches back and lets loose a horrifying bellowing screech, which seems to roll along the wall like a wave, sending men staggering in fear, making them pause in their fight so that they're cut down with ease by the Termagants and Warriors they're fighting. The Tyrant steps down from the parapet, its hoofed feet sending splinters of masonry flying as it stamps down with all of its massive weight.

Gazing around, it fixes its evil eyes on the Colonel as he musters his men for a counter-attack. They charge in, las-bolts bouncing harmlessly off the monster's armoured hide, their bayonets snapping against its chitinous plates. Then the bonesword sweeps down and I see a spray of blood fountain into the air as four men are cut down with that single blow. The whip lashes out, its barbs tearing across the chest of another Guardsman, his ragged corpse flung from the wall to land in a limp heap in the courtyard.

Surely even the Colonel has met his match this time. He's chopping his way through a brood of Warriors to get at the Hive Tyrant. There's a pause in the fighting and he glances over the parapet to the ground outside. He stops for a moment and looks over to where we're positioned. With a wave of his arms, he signals us to attack.

'Here we go again, Last Chancers!' I shout out, and start heading for the wall. I've taken perhaps five steps when something seems wrong. I realise that I'm alone and I stop and look around. They're all just standing there, looking up at the Hive Tyrant as it butchers another squad of men.

'What the frag is this?' I howl. I grab Sergeant Feonix by his lapels and push him towards the wall, but he turns round and snarls at me.

'This is madness!' he shouts over the cries from the slaughter on the wall. 'That's a fraggin' Hive Tyrant, it's gonna kill every one of us! We've gotta get the hell out of here while we can. Deliverance has fallen, Kage, face it.' He calms down a little and fixes me with an intense stare. 'There's nothing more we can do! We've gotta save ourselves. You ain't no fraggin' martyr, Kage, and you know it.'

He's right, but then something catches my eye over their heads. There's lights dropping down from the stars again, curving down from orbit towards Deliverance in a long arc. I glance back at the gatehouse, and see the gates shuddering as some titanic beast tries to break them down. I make a decision.

'Look,' I tell them, pointing up to the pinpricks of light falling to the south. 'There ain't no escaping Deliverance, boys. That's more mycetic spores coming down, we're gonna be surrounded. There's no way we can get clear of the area before those things reach here.'

Kruzo, from Letts's squad, opens his mouth to argue but I cut him off.

'There ain't no getting outta this one, lads. We're all gonna die in Deliverance. Now I see it two ways. You can die running from the fight, like the thieves and cowards everyone thinks we are. Sure, you can do that, just get over the wall and hide out. But it won't take them long to find you, when you're all alone out there in the night, cowering in the grass, trying not to sh...'

A crash from the gatehouse distracts me and I turn around to have a look. The Chimera behind the gates is rocking heavily on its tracks now, it's gonna go

over any second, so I better make this quick.

'For frag's sake! We ain't got anything worth fighting for 'cept our pride. Right now I don't give a frag about the natives, or the Emperor, or the Colonel. But what I do care about is how I'm gonna die, and it ain't gonna be with my back turned or on my knees. I'm gonna go down fighting like a man. If there's any men here with me, then you better come too, otherwise you boys can just go running off to cry, dying on your bellies like the scum you are.'

I spit on the ground in front of them and then start walking towards the gate. I'm taking a hell of a risk, 'cause if they don't follow me I'm gonna be standing in front of the gate on my own when whatever it is that's so big and nasty to batter it's way through three feet of plasteel gets through. Then I hear the thud of boots and they're there with me, so I guess the suckers fell for it.

I look up and see that the Hive Tyrant's gone from the gate tower, but I can still see the Colonel, slicing away with that big power sword of his. Emperor knows how the frag he managed that one. Well, if I live to see the dawn, I might just find out. With a screech of tearing plasteel the gates are torn apart and the Chimera gets shunted towards us. There's a sound like a tank ramming a building and the personnel carrier is flung upwards, spinning through the air. It crashes down and its fuel goes up, a massive fireball that shoots a hundred feet into the air. In the flames and smoke I see a sight that will follow me to my grave, long may it be before I get there.

In the red glare comes this huge Tyranid creature, about twelve feet tall and just as wide. It's some kind of Carnifex, but nothing I've ever seen before. It's got four massive scythe-like arms, but the bony extrusions across its shoulders jut forward, rows of spikes thrust outwards like it's some kind of living battering ram. Nestled between its immense shoulders, its head is kind of fused with its chest, a large fang-ringed mouth open in a permanent roar. Pieces of twisted metal hang from the spines as it stomps through

the smoke and flames like some monstrous devil from the pits of hell.

Without pause, it shoulders aside the wreck of the Chimera and I'm horrified to see that some of the burning vehicle tears off along one of the creature's armoured plates. The debris carries on burning, the flames crawling along the Carnifex's carapace but it just keeps advancing steadily as if nothing was happening.

'Blow that bastard away!' I shout, and everyone snaps out of the spell.

Breiden opens up with the lascannon, a bolt of energy powerful enough to cripple battle tanks scoring a wound across the Carnifex's armoured skull making thick, dark blood dribble down the exoskeleton of its body. The heavy bolter in Franz's squad kicks in, explosive shells rippling across legs as thick as tree trunks in a shower of detonations.

But it still comes on, the ground shaking as those massive feet thud down into the dirt. It pauses for a second, its beady eyes reflecting the flickering flames and fixes us with a stare. Its arms arch back, spreading wider than the length of a tank and its cavernous mouth opens to bellow forth a roar that can probably be heard offworld. It breaks into a run, gathering momentum. Lasgun fire, heavy bolter shots and lascannon shots bounce off as it lumbers towards us. Once more its mouth opens for another terrifying roar, but Breiden picks his moment precisely, his aim guided by the Emperor I'm sure, and the next lascannon bolt lands in its mouth, smashing its head to a pulp, scattering fragments of skull across the courtyard.

For a moment I think that even that isn't enough to stop it, as it comes rumbling on towards us, but then the rest of the body catches up with what's happening and it collapses to the ground with dark, thick ichor oozing out in a gigantic puddle around the mammoth corpse.

I breathe a sigh of relief, glad that those useless fraggers decided to follow me after all, otherwise I'd be little more than a smear along those claws by now. However, just as my heart rate drops to something just below a million beats a

minute, the rest of the Tyranids start to pour through the opening. At the front is a brood of Warriors, deathspitters and devourers firing as they advance.

Men are going down all around me and a stray spatter of acid splashes onto my arm. The pain is almost unbearable and I stoop to grab a handful of dirt to rub the acid off. My right arm's almost numb, so I drop my lascannon and grab my chainsword in my left hand. The lead Warriors go down to fire from the lascannon and heavy bolters, but there's more and more of the things pouring through the gap now. I look around to see how the platoon's holding out, and I see there's only about two dozen of us left now.

Franz catches my gaze and I see his desperation turn into fierce pride in that single glance. As if a subconscious order is given, we all charge forward, throwing ourselves at the tide of beasts sweeping into Deliverance. My chainsword bites flesh and I hear an inhuman shriek of pain. I'm not really looking at what's happening, I'm just chopping left and right, hacking blindly, knowing that I can't miss in the tight press of alien creatures swirling around me.

Then a massive clawed paw, larger than a Cthellan Cudbear's, comes out of the darkness, smashing me across the face. My head spins and I only dimly feel a sharp blade cutting across my thigh. I feel something wet and sticky pouring down my legs and I gaze down numbly, seeing my blood spilling to the dirt. I try to take a step forward but all my strength seems to have been sapped from me. I drop to my knees, feeling rough alien skin rasping against me, pushing past, leaving me for dead.

Then a shadow descends and I feel like I'm falling, falling down a deep, dark hole.

My ears pick up singing, my mind ringing to the sound of angelic voices singing the praises of the Emperor. So this is what it's like to die. There is an Emperor after all, and I shall receive my judgement, just like Nathaniel and the Colonel said. My thoughts are getting slow, but for the first time in ten years of

fighting I feel proud. I didn't run this time, I stayed. I'm dying, but I went down fighting. Surely that's got to count for something.



CAN HEAR VOICES, shouting, orders being bellowed. So I guess I'm alive then, and I really was right about those falling lights. I try to open my eyes, but the left one seems closed up. I raise an arm, feeling so weak, and touch my temple. Instant pain tells me that there's a bruise the size of a small moon up there, and it's probably blood crusting up my eye. My right arm is swathed in bandages and won't move at all.

Through my good eye I see there's troops running backwards and forwards, and I watch a line of three Leman Russ tanks warming up, ready to go out of the gate. I guess I'm propped up against the redoubt; I can feel rough stonework poking into my back. I turn my head slowly left and right, wary of dizziness and nausea, and I see that there's others like me, bandaged and bloody, all along the redoubt.

The Colonel walks past and he notices that I'm awake. He strides up and stands in front of me, thankfully blocking out the bright light of the sun. I can't see his face, it's in shadow, but he's looking down at me.

'Still alive then, Kage?' he demands, his voice as gruff as ever.

'Fraid so, sir. Guess I can't kick the habit just yet.' I try to manage a smile, but my face is just a mass of aching and pain.

'I heard what happened,' he says, dropping down on one knee so that I can see those icy eyes as they fix me with their stare. 'Tell me one thing, Kage. You could have run out on me, you had the chance and you have done it before. What made you fight?'

I fix him with my good eye, returning his gaze with a steady look of my own.

'Well, sir, it's like this,' I explain. 'I saw the lights coming down, and I knew they were Imperial Guard transports. Mycetic

spores just come straight down, but they had a landing trajectory. So I knew that Deliverance was saved. Thing was, though, we had to hold out, 'cause if the Tyranids got into the compound we'd all be dead. There's nowhere to run from those creatures.'

The Colonel frowns at me.

'So why did you tell your men that there were more spores coming down, rather than the relief force?' he asks.

'You must know why, sir,' I reply, because it seems so obvious to me. 'If I told them that help was on the way, they'd lose what little stomach they had left. They'd think they could give up, get away from here. But like I said, there wasn't any escape from Deliverance, not a chance. So I did the only thing I could. I stripped them of that false hope, I gave them nothing to live for except life itself.'

'You see, sir, when you ain't got frag-all worth fighting for, you'll still fight to be alive. Give a man a chance to back down and he'll take it, but give him nothing and he'll grab what he can with both hands and not let go for as long as he can. He'll fight to his last breath just to take one more breath, to feel his heart beat just once more before he dies. If you stick a man in the middle of a fight and give him a gun, he'll fight like a cornered rat 'cause there's nothing else he can do.'

'That's the way the Last Chancers work, sir. It's exactly what you do to us all. We ain't got no choice but to fight, and fight good, 'cause if we don't, we're dead. None of us wants to die so we'll do all we can, everything that's possible including going on your damned suicide mission just to breathe one more time. It's why I fight, why they fight.'

He just grunts and stands up. He turns to walk away but I call after him.

'There's another reason why I'll fight my damnedest, sir!'

He spins around and looks at me, an eyebrow raised in question.

'I- I ain't gonna give you the fraggering satisfaction of seeing me dead just yet, sir!' •



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IF YOU WOULD like to meet the authors and artists behind your favourite stories and comic characters just pop into the Games Workshop stores listed below from midday on the date shown. The guys will be happy to sign your collections of *Warhammer Monthly* and *Inferno!*, as well as chat about their work, show you their portfolios, answer your questions – maybe even do a quick sketch for you!

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THE REBEL CAPITAL OF PLANET OBZIDION IS TO BE MADE AN EXAMPLE OF, RAZED TO ASHES BY IMPERIAL BOMBARDMENT.



OBVIOUS TACTICS!

Episode Twelve

SCRIPT & ART: DAVID PUGH



"I'LL SEE THAT BLOOD FLOWS WHEN I GET OVER THERE!"

GAAAHH!
OUR PLAN IS CORRUPTED...
OBZIDION CITY WAS NOT DESTROYED!

IS THIS YOUR DOING, LITTLE MAN?

I AM PLEASED...
HNN...TO CLAIM MY SHARE IN THE...
HNN...UNDOING!

WE KNOW YOU HAVE HIDDEN MILLIONS OF INNOCENTS BENEATH THE CITY...

YES, THEIR DEATH SPASM COULD HAVE CREATED SUCH ENERGY, AND GUIDED BY THE NINE HEADS WOULD HAVE CREATED A NEW EYE OF TERROR.

BUT WE SLEW THE NINE HEADS! YOUR PLANS BROKEN!

FOOLISH, LITTLE MAN...

...THE MIGHT OF CHAOS CANNOT BE STOPPED SO EASILY... THE NINE HEADS WERE BUT HERALDS OF ONE MUCH GREATER...

N'GREEL B'HAN, PRINCE OF PLAGUES, COMES TO GUIDE THEIR WAY!

AAAARGH!

TROILUS!

LORD, NO RESPONSE FROM OMICRON.

REALIGN THE GUNS... DIVINE OVERLORD WILL LEAD THE BOMBARDMENT OF THE CITY, BEGIN A NEW COUNTDOWN.

KILL ME, I AM RUINED!

THE CITY IS SAFE!

NO, THE ALIGNMENT BOOSTERS!

IF WE CAN'T SHOOT IT, WE'LL SMASH THE CITY APART!

SIR, THE PLATFORM IS NOT DESIGNED FOR ATMOSPHERIC ENTRY!

WHAT?

STOP!

AAAAAH!

NOOOOO!

NOW, KILL THE GRAVITY STABILISERS!

URGH!... TOO LATE... TRAITOR... WE'RE ON COLLISION COURSE WITH THE CITY...

HAH, WHAT IS THIS? CHAOS HAS AN ALLY ABOARD!

TROILUS,
ARE YOU HURT?

THIS IS
MADNESS,
CHAOS TRULY
RULES HERE!

TROILUS, TO ME
IF YOU CAN!

WE ARE ON
COURSE TO
STRIKE ANOTHER
BOMBARDMENT
PLATFORM!

I MUST REACH
THE CONTROL
CHAMBER!

WHAT NOW,
ANTENOR?

USE YOUR
STABILISER
JETS!

I RETURN TO
THE FRAY!

KABLAM!

MADE THE
GUARD-RAIL...



THE WRATH OF THE
EMPERUM TRULY FALLS
THIS CURSED PLANET!"



"THANK THE EMPEROR,
ONE TROUBLE IS OVER!"

AND ANOTHER BEGINS, ON THE
SURFACE THE FORCE OF THE
BOMBARDMENT HAS TORN A RIFT
IN OBZIDION'S CRUST, A DEADLY
FISSURE RIPS ITS WAY TOWARDS
THE HEART OF THE CAPITAL.

TO BE CONTINUED.



The Doorway Between

by Rjurik Davidson

'I WANT THEM DEAD and my property returned to me.' Baron von Kleist leaned forward as he spoke, the light throwing shadows across his thin face. He was a tall, gaunt man fast approaching middle age, clean shaven, his black hair slicked back like a raven's wing. And although he wore a simple cloak, secured over his shoulder with a plain clasp, he had the air of nobility about him. Perhaps this was due to the very simplicity of his attire, for true nobles have no need to dress flamboyantly, to show off with frills and lace. Only the new nobility needed to prove their credentials with gaudiness and show.

Or at least, that's what Frantz Heidel thought as he sized up the man opposite him. The witch hunter leaned back against his chair and glanced around the inn. Logs crackled in an open fireplace, yellow flames lazily throwing out heat. A few old-timers leaned up against the bar, heads drooping forwards as if they were gaining weight by the minute. In the opposite corner, a group of young men sat and laughed, their faces ruddy from cheap wine. The innkeeper's daughter served them, making her way from behind the bar, through a wave of suggestive comments, to the young men's table. Bechafen, Heidel thought to himself, could be any town in the Empire.

Heidel dressed plainly himself, his clothes a series of simply-cut browns and greens, perfect for the wilderness. His face mirrored his attire, brown straggling hair falling around his ears, lines etched into his skin, thin lips. The only remarkable feature were his eyes, deep and dark. It was as if behind them whole

vistas of passion and zealotry were concealed. Only the pupils allowed a glimpse, as if through a keyhole into a blazing room. He turned back to regard the nobleman.

'The destruction of evil, that is the task I've set myself. It is my vow to seek out this cancer that grows daily in the world. And when I find it...' Heidel let his voice trail off.

'A noble cause, undoubtedly.' The Baron smiled slightly. 'I understand you burned a man just three days ago. Tell me, have you ever destroyed an innocent by mistake?'

'Never.'

'And how can you be sure?' The Baron's eyes were alive with the challenge.

'Witchcraft, sorcery and other forms of corruption are revealed by the stench that wafts before them. Evil betrays itself at every turn. Those who are sensitive feel its presence – I know I am in darkness when I cannot see,' Heidel said rather distractedly. He leaned forward, his voice gaining conviction. 'The innocent have nothing to fear, for they walk in the light. But the guilty will reveal themselves, and they should tremble because only the gods and light and truth can cleanse the world of the foul existence of corruption.'

The Baron seemed satisfied with Heidel's reply and leaned back, sipping his dark red wine. A moment later he placed the glass back onto the table. 'So this job is suited to you? You can track down this evil band and – how do you put it? – cleanse them. The Dark Warrior has the heirloom, no doubt. When you have cleansed this foul brood and retrieved it, you will return it to me.'

Seven hundred crowns for its safe return. You can find me here when you return.'

'Tell me, Baron, when this band attacked your wagon, how did they know to take the heirloom?' Heidel poured himself another small measure of wine from the ceramic carafe.

'I brought all my valuables with me when I chose to settle here, in Bechafen. They took us by surprise on the road and my men fled, the cowardly fools, leaving the Follower of Darkness and his band to take what they wanted. Naturally I am somewhat embarrassed, so I trust that your task will be kept private.' The Baron covered one thin hand with the other, as if to show what he meant.

'And what does this heirloom look like?'

'It is a pendant, silver, set with a blue gem. It is beautiful like a clear sky above the ice-stilled Reik in winter. When caught in the light it throws a thousand tiny sparks of silver into the air, and the blue becomes as deep and rich as the oncoming night.'

'A beautiful object.' Heidel smiled, picturing the gem in his head with its changing blues and its flashing silver reflections.

'My most precious,' the Baron said earnestly.

'You must be quite concerned.'

'I am sick with worry that I might never see this precious thing again.' Then Baron shook his head from side to side, as if in disbelief that the pendant could ever have been stolen.

'Well fear not, your Lordship. I shall return your heirloom to you, and in doing so, give these foul obscenities their just desserts: an eternal sleep in a long, cold grave.' Heidel's voice was firm, solid, emphatic. 'I will need to find a guide of course, someone who knows the land—'

'Ah, I have already thought of that,' the Baron interrupted with a wave of his hand. 'I know just the man. He's a tracker, familiar with these parts. Karl Sassen. I shall send him word to meet you here at the inn.'

'Well, if this Sassen is able to do the job, then we should be able to leave tomorrow.' The witch hunter raised his

glass high. 'To success in our mission,' he said.

'To success,' Von Kleist echoed, smiling broadly.



THE TRACKER, Sassen, arrived mid-morning. Heidel was reading *The Confessions of Andreus Sinder*, a book full of the most personal and incisive perceptions into the nature of evil and darkness when there was a sharp rat-tat-tat on the door. He placed the heavy volume aside almost reluctantly and admitted him.

Sassen was a little man, sprightly like a small animal. His body seemed perpetually tense, as if he might need to spring from danger at any moment. Heidel couldn't help but think he looked like a weasel, a view accentuated by his long nose and soft, thin, facial hair.

'Come in,' Heidel invited and Sassen followed him into the room. Heidel sat down but he was disconcerted when the tracker, instead of doing likewise, began to walk around, stopping only to inspect Heidel's possessions.

'A nice long-coat,' Sassen said in a soft high voice, more gentle and articulate than one would expect from a tracker. He rubbed the fur of the lapel between thumb and forefinger.

Heidel agreed uncertainly, unsure of what to make of the little man.

Sassen touched the hilt of the dagger on the small table by the side of the bed, but Heidel, getting increasingly annoyed, noticed that the tracker had cocked his head and that his eyes were on *The Confessions of Andreus Sinder*.

'When do we start?' The tracker turned and, for the first time since entering the room, looked Heidel straight in the eye.

Heidel, by this time, was struggling to contain his anger. The tracker had no manners. How dare he wander into Heidel's room and begin to peruse at his leisure! Heidel bit his tongue and struggled for a moment before responding. 'You realise the danger of the task?'

The little man scrunched his face up.
'I'm not a warrior.'

'It is our joint task to recover the Baron's heirloom, so together we must do whatever is necessary. If that means you fight, then so be it. I will not complain about having to help with the tracking.'

Sassen looked confused for a moment, as if there was something faulty in Heidel's logic, then nodded in agreement. 'Very well,' he said before sitting down on the bed and picking up the heavy book which lay there. 'This book,' the tracker said. 'I have heard of Andreus Sinder.'

'You are an educated man?' Heidel was both impressed and curious.

'Oh, not really,' Sassen said with a self-deprecating smile. 'I've learned to read a little: just a word here and there.'

For the first time Heidel warmed to the man with the rodent's face. Humbleness had always been a virtue to Heidel.

Sassen continued: 'I heard that Sinder was something of a sinner in his youth. Corrupted, they say, before he understood the true nature of evil.'

'But he renounced the darkness,' Heidel countered instantly, 'and believed that his knowledge could be used the better to combat it.'

Sassen smiled momentarily, revealing sharp white teeth. 'Could that be true? That a man could turn his back on darkness, when once he revelled in it?'

'It appears to be the case,' Heidel admitted.

'Then you have entertained the thought, Herr Heidel, that you might benefit from delving into forbidden acts and unhealthy practices?' Sassen smiled and his leathery face was cunning and mischievous.

Heidel's eyes flashed dangerously. 'There are some,' he noted, 'who say that they would never consider such a possibility. They argue that one can never be sure of one's resilience, that only the strongest can return to the light after tasting such sweet and poisoned fruit.'

Sassen stood and began to pace, intensely interested in the discussion. 'And you agree with this position?'

'No,' Heidel stated resolutely.

'There is surely no alternative.' The tracker seemed pleased. Evidently he believed he had cornered Heidel. 'Only such a position can be held if you wish to avoid experimenting with the Dark yourself, and yet see some value in *The Confessions*. Otherwise what would your approach to Sinder be?'

'I would have killed him.' Heidel's voice was steady, adamant.

'Even—'

Heidel finished Sassen's question: 'Even after he had confessed the error of his ways.'

Sassen stared fixedly, as if in disbelief, his small mouth open, revealing the small, sharp teeth. Heidel himself sat quite still, feeling almost guilty to have crushed what little intellectual argument the tracker had mustered – but knowing without question that he would have done just what he had declared.

Later, after the pair had worked out a basic plan for the task ahead, Sassen left to organise the supplies: saddle-bags, his sword, blankets, food, and so on. Heidel, too, readied himself: He put on his old brown leather coat, hiding the chainmail he had donned for the battle that was surely to come. On his head he placed a black, broad-brimmed hat, weather-beaten and stained with sweat. He attached his sword to his waist and checked the long bow and quiver that he would carry on the saddle of his grey mare.

Was it true, Heidel wondered, that he would have killed Andreus Sinder, the author of one of the most erudite tracts on the nature of evil, a text filled with piecing insights into the darkness in all its manifestations? Almost without realising it, he picked up *The Confessions* from where it lay on the table. He turned the cover over in his hands, feeling its weight. He rubbed his fingers across its cover. The leather was soft and supple. Instinctively he opened to the first page where the manuscript began. He read the first lines: *Only by my participation in these unnatural events did I understand the true gravity of these horrors. Only then did I know the need to burn twisted*

evil with the bright flame of the sword.

Heidel placed the book down, lost in thought.



SEIDEL MET SASSEN by the gates of Bechafen in the early afternoon as the sun was just beginning to break through the lumbering clouds overhead.

From Bechafen they rode out on the road that ultimately led to Talabheim, passing through a series of small hamlets surrounded by green rolling fields. Their path ran south, though later it would turn gradually west. Cattle and sheep stood lazily about, munching on the grass and occasionally turning their soft dull eyes towards the two men and their horses as they rode by. Beyond the cows stood fields of wheat and barley, turning gold in the late summer. A farmer steering a cart carrying grain passed in the opposite direction; when he saw Heidel he bowed his head and would not look at him. Then a merchant train carrying barrels and furs clanked by, its heavily armed outriders giving them hard, silent stares.

Finally a couple of young nobles on dashing black horses galloped across the fields and crossed the road in front of them without greeting, disappearing into the distance in pursuit of some unseen prey. After that they were alone on the worn path which meandered through the tree-dotted scrubland. Slowly, inexorably, the road turned westwards.

As they rode Heidel felt distinctly happy. At last, he told himself, on the trail of evil again. Lord Sigmar, he prayed under his breath, protect me on this journey. Let me return safely, the scalps of my enemies in my hand. He never knew if the gods heard his prayers, but praying always seemed a wise idea. For if they did hear, perhaps they would deign to look over him.

As if trying to fill the silence, Sassen began to tell Heidel about his life, though the witch hunter would have been quite happy not to hear it. The little man had

lived in the country hereabouts for many years and had spent time hunting and clearing the land. Once, though, he had sailed the seas with a group of Norsemen, raiding unprotected towns, pillaging fat merchant ships. But since then, he assured Heidel, he had decided to work permanently around Bechafen. Heidel was not sure whether to believe the tracker. Sailing with Norsemen? Sigmar keep him, he thought; let the little man have his fantasies.

'The Baron told me that the attack on his goods occurred some ten miles from Bechafen,' Sassen continued. 'He says the band of brigands headed east into the forest, towards the mountains.'

'How did he discover that?'

'After the attack he and his men returned to the carts, only to find them plundered. A fresh trail led off into the woods.'

Heidel nodded silently and disappeared back into his own thoughts as they rode on.

The scattered vegetation around the road slowly transformed into forest: first a copse of trees here; then a slightly larger copse there, then they came quicker and faster until there was only a wall of thick greenery. Heidel was most comfortable in the wilderness. There was something about its simplicity. Danger was swift and direct: wild beasts searching for food; the descent of the winter snows; the surge of the stormy sea. Heidel's worries were equally simple: finding a camp-site out of the weather; keeping warm and dry; saving enough provisions for the journey. Evil was stark, clear, easy to locate; creatures of darkness wandering the woods, raiding small villages, or hiding in the mountains. Heidel's task was simple: to find them, and to eliminate them.

Cities were another story. Affluence made Heidel uneasy. The machinations and intrigues of the courts, great glittering balls with ladies hiding their pockmarks under white paint and rouge, lords and princes wallowing in a sordid world of whores and white powders. Nothing was simple, everything was veiled and obscured. People spoke and

acted according to complex codes and signs that had to be interpreted. A friendly greeting could conceal a serious insult. Your best friend could be your worst enemy. Simplicity and directness were seen as colloquial and quaint. Danger came in all sorts of guises, all manner of forms. He could never move in that society. They brought malevolence upon themselves. He could not, he would not, protect them. Better to leave that to witch hunters like Immanuel Mendelsohn.

Heidel leaned over and spat on the ground at the thought of the man.

Mendelsohn, a self proclaimed witch hunter, was a nobleman by birth. He had grown up amongst the lords and the ladies – and the whores. He could move with ease in high society: with his frilled silk shirts, his brown curly locks, his floppy hats and pointed leather boots. And, for all this, Mendelsohn was not above suspicion. After all, it is a short step from silk shirts to other pleasures of the flesh. First came the finery, then the women and the illicit substances. Then came corruption, sure as night followed day. No, Heidel did not like him or his kind. Heidel did not like the aristocrat's search for fame, his love of publicity, his attempt to turn everything into a drama. Mendelsohn gave witch hunters a bad name and it would not surprise Heidel if one day he would have to go after the noble himself. That stray thought brought an ironic smile to his lips.

Heidel shook his head and banished Mendelsohn from his thoughts. He recognised that such thoughts had a habit of turning him distinctly surly. He looked around at the forest. The trees seemed to be getting thicker, more twisted, the underbrush more prickly and uninviting. Sassen rode beside him in silence, tracker's eyes now intent on finding the trail of the quarry.

Maybe four hours after they left Bechafen, Sassen suddenly called a halt. He reined in his horse and leaped down to the road. He crept, head down along the edge of the forest. It appeared to Heidel as if the little man was actually sniffing for the trail. Then the tracker looked up suddenly and stated: 'Here it is.'

Heidel dismounted too and walked over to him. On the ground were a series of scuffed tracks leading into the forest. Without Sassen he would have ridden straight past it.

The way into the forest was marked by several broken branches and the tracks, still distinct after two days without rain, leading into the darkness. Once into the trees it would be hard going. Branches hung low like outstretched arms barring the way; roots twisted like tentacles from the ground, threatening to trip them.

'Do you know this area well?' Heidel asked the tracker.

'Fairly well. It's all pretty much like this, I'm afraid. But that means it will hamper the band as much as us. We'll have to walk, anyway.' Sassen wrinkled his eyes, an annoying habit that Heidel had noticed; the little man always squinted when he spoke.

'It doesn't look like we'll be able to travel at night,' Heidel said. He looked to the sky, as if night was about to fall then and there. But it was still deep and blue with clumpy white clouds rolling slowly overhead.

'Unlikely,' Sassen agreed. 'We'll just have to make the best of the day.'

'Fine. Then we had better begin.'



FOR FOUR DAYS they pushed through the forest, the gnarled branches of the trees blocking them and their horses, thorns and bushes scratching against their legs, drawing blood wherever the skin was exposed. In no time Heidel's hands were covered in a delicate latticework of dried blood. The days were dark as the sun was shut out by the canopy overhead. But if the days were dark, the nights were blacker still. Even the shadowy forms of the trees disappeared into the night.

Every day passed the same. They awoke at first light and departed as quickly as possible. During the day they pushed on as hard as they could for, according to the Baron, the bandits would have two days' start on them. If Heidel and Sassen

pressed on with this pace they could catch them within a week at most, less if the band had made more permanent camp somewhere. When they caught them, surprise would be the key. Heidel would stand no chance against a united group; he would have to pick them off one by one.

On the morning of the fourth day since entering the forest, Sassen stopped and inspected the tracks, an action that had become increasingly regular. ‘They are less than a day away from us.’ He peered up at Heidel and squinted.

Ahead of them they could see twenty feet at the most. At any moment they might stumble upon the prey. That could mean death or worse. In these close confines, the hunters would become the hunted, and the Black Warrior’s horde would surely crush them. Often Heidel heard rustling close to them in the forest or fluttering amongst the branches above, but whatever it was remained unsighted. He assumed they were just the movements of birds and animals, but they made him jittery anyway.

Perhaps to ease his tension Sassen kept trying to strike up a conversation, trying to get Heidel to tell of his exploits as a witch hunter.

‘How many have you put to death?’ he asked one time.

Heidel glared at him.

‘You are grim, Herr Heidel.’

‘Better to say nothing at all, than to say nothing using many words.’ The witch hunter spoke plainly.

Undeterred, Sassen continued: ‘I hear you burnt a man only last month. What for?’

‘He was in league with corruption.’ Heidel practically spat the sentence out, the words so filled with revulsion and disdain.

‘What did he do?’ Sassen inquired timidly.

‘When I arrived in this particular village many were falling ill. It was like a plague.’ Heidel’s voice rose in intensity as he spoke, passion beginning to creep into his account. ‘At first I could not discern the cause of this illness. I studied the

victims and found that they had great red swellings beneath the skin. Under the armpits, on the neck, between the legs. As a test I punctured one of the victim’s swellings, and from the wound squirmed a writhing mass of worm-like creatures, all purple and yellow and bulbous. Alas, the victim died. Later I tried to cleanse a victim by applying fire to his swellings. But the strain was too much on his body.’

Heidel glanced at Sassen, who looked on with a mix of disgust and excitement.

‘Continue, continue,’ the tracker said, pulling his thin beard with his fingers and licking his lips.

‘I realised that the only victims were men, and so turned to the origins of the illness: if I could determine the cause then perhaps I could save these poor people. It took me but a day to find the truth. I interviewed the men and found that those who fell ill first had something in common. All were suitors of a woman, a particular woman. Searching her house I found nothing. But I was undeterred. I pressed the woman for the names of all who courted her. Under duress she produced a list, and all on that list were ill... all save one, the keeper of the inn. I found in that man’s cellar a cauldron full of writhing, squirming larvae. These he would feed to the men when they were drunk, placing them in their ale. Somehow they would eat their way through the flesh and the insides. And so he was burnt at the stake that very night.’

‘But why, why did he do it?’

‘He called it an act of love. He loved her, but she did not return his feelings. As a result he hated her other lovers and decided to kill them. But as he acted out his drama he lost his mind. His hatred for these particular men turned into a hatred of all men. Soon it would have become a hatred of all the world and everything within it. That way is the path to darkness.’

After he finished there was silence for a moment, and then Sassen burst into a high fit of uncontrollable laughter.

‘You think it funny?’ Heidel’s eyes flashed and his hand moved unconsciously to his sword.

'No, no, of course not.' Sassen suddenly looked worried and did not ask any more questions of Heidel.



AROUND NOON on the fourth day, the trail they had been following suddenly met a path, wide enough for two carts, leading away to left and right. Once it must have been well used, but now was overgrown, with the trees threatening to close in once more. Sassen handed his horse's reins to Heidel and bent down to examine the tracks.

'They passed to the left,' he said, 'but there are other tracks here, that come from the right. Someone on a horse. It looks like he dismounted, for there are new footprints. Here, see?' Sassen pointed to the new tracks. 'Perhaps he met the group here and has joined them.'

Heidel peered down. There was a small group of hoof-prints, one over the other, as if the horse was made to wait for some time. Next to them were the fresh prints of a boot.

'They are soft-soled,' Sassen noted. 'See how faint the tracks are.'

'Well, with only one horse they can't have gone far. If we mount here we may catch them today. How old are these tracks?' Heidel peered down at the tracks himself.

'Perhaps half a day.' Sassen squinted in the direction that the tracks led, as if he might yet see the band travelling away from them.

'Then we shall ride slowly – and tonight we shall come upon them in a hail of fire and light.' Heidel's eyes flashed at Sassen. The tracker smiled grimly and looked away.

They rode throughout the rest of that day and, as it became dark, Heidel turned to Sassen: 'You must set up camp here. We do not know how far away the band is, but we must take no chances. I shall walk ahead and begin the work, using my bow. I'll be back before morning. Do not light a fire, for I want you here when I return. Otherwise...' Heidel had nothing

more to say, so he nodded, dismounted, took his bow and quiver, and began the walk.

Sassen left the path behind him for a clearing, the two horses in tow. 'Good luck,' he called out to the witch hunter, who did not acknowledge him.



THE NEW PATH was wide and above him he could see the stars. It was a relief to feel the open air again and to feel the fresh wind. *Sigmar, he prayed under his breath, may the forest be kind to me tonight. And Ulric, god of battle, to you I pray also: together may we come down upon these abominations and cleanse them with blood and steel.*

And his heart began to sing, as it always did before he went into battle. For something stirred in him before he killed. It was as if his soul was suddenly in harmony with the world, as if there was some secret melody, some logic, which things and events travelled along. Truth, that was what it was. When a foe squirmed upon his sword – that was truth. When the light in a mutant's eyes dimmed slowly, and then faded to black.

The road opened out into a large clearing. He found them there, camping around a small fire. Already they were drunk or intoxicated, and he smiled silently. Baron von Kleist had been right, these were evil things that needed cleansing. Darkness undermines itself, he thought. There were seven of them. Six things: neither men nor beasts but something in between, twisted and vile. And the warrior, dull in his black and heavy armour, his face hidden by a great helmet. Some nameless black meat was charring on a spit above the fire. Bottles of liquid lay strewn amongst the creatures, who rolled around on the ground amongst the dirt and their own filth. Only the warrior sat calmly on an overturned log, contemplative and evil.

When three of the corrupted men-things began to make their way from the clearing down a slope away to the right of him, Heidel seized his chance and

followed them. He crept as quietly as possible, a shadow in the darkness, yet cursing under his breath as he heard the twigs breaking beneath his feet. But the creatures didn't hear him, for they were crashing down the slope carelessly. After a minute they came to a small stream flowing gently, the sound of water over rocks floating through the air. All three dipped waterskins into the water, splashing their filth into the clear stream, and turned to carry them up the hill.

It was then that Heidel struck. His first arrow hit the leading beastman in the neck, piercing its soft fur and sending blood gushing through its bear-mouth.

Pandemonium broke loose. In a whirr of motion a second arrow whisked through the air, another close behind. Two hits and a thing with tentacles fell groaning. A last beastman hissed like a gigantic snake; something heavy crashed into it from behind, screaming and lashing out. Then Heidel retreated back into the darkness. An excellent initial foray; three creatures dead. *Praise be to Sigmar. Blessings upon the name of Ulric.*



WHEN HE ARRIVED back at the clearing where he had left the tracker, he found Sassen sitting silently between the horses. It was still dark and the chill bit at his face. Sassen was shivering despite being wrapped in a blanket.

'A fine night, Sassen. In the darkness I struck against malevolence, and Sigmar was on our side.' Heidel spoke fast, breathlessly recounting the night's events. 'We must ride before dawn. The sun will soon rise and we must catch them again before they have a chance to move or find us unawares. The darkness will give us cover.'

The crisp air was motionless as they rode. Before long the eastern sky began to lighten. Finally, as they came close to the quarry's camp, the sky had turned gold and red and pink, but the sun was still hiding behind the tree-line.

Heidel glanced at Sassen and wondered

if the tracker would be of any use in the fight. The little man had a short sword at his side, but until now it had only been used to hack at bushes and branches. It had not yet tasted blood, unless the stories of sailing with Norsemen were true. Perhaps this would be the morning of its baptism.

When Heidel judged that they were close to the camp, Heidel hissed for them to halt, and they tied their horses to a tree.

'Let's hope that they have not heard us,' he whispered to Sassen. 'Are you ready for this?'

Sassen looked at the ground, then to the sky, and finally nodded briefly, pursing his lips. The fear emanated from him like a scent.

Heidel's mood had changed since his joyous return from his initial foray. Perhaps he could feel Sassen's fear, and somehow he had taken it as his own: an uncomfortable, dissolute, emotion. He felt a terrible sense of foreboding. And though he prayed to Sigmar and Ulric once more, his heart refused to lighten. Instead it was weighed down, leaden. For a moment Heidel felt the inevitability of defeat. How could he face that Dark Warrior, that faceless, soulless thing – all darkness and metal, terrible and sublime? The warrior had seemed just another man in the night. But as the sky became light, its image in his head to grow in stature; it was as if the very light was eaten by evil, which turned the Warrior into something else entirely. Now he was ten feet tall, his armour hardened, impenetrable.

Heidel shook himself. 'Fool,' he muttered under his breath. But despite his reassurances he still felt the sands of uncertainty shift beneath his feet.

They crept along the side of the track and before long came to the camp. Heidel was almost surprised that the creatures were still there. Three corrupted mutants sat in a circle facing outwards, in their hands jagged and vicious blades. There was a chicken-man. Behind him crouched something with what Heidel first took to be a shield on his back, before he realised that it was a shell that has grown from the man's flesh. And finally there was another, a truly foul, corrupt thing which made

Heidel rage with fury and sick with revulsion when he saw it. Where its head should have been there was merely a gaping mouth dripping ooze and slime, pink and putrescent.

The Warrior was nowhere to be seen.

'Sassen,' he said, 'the time has come to mete out justice.'

They began.



HOW BEAUTIFUL, Heidel thought, as his arrows arched their way across the clearing in the still, crisp dawn air: rising ever so slightly in their flight, and then dropping subtly, before plunging into flesh and blood. For a moment he forgot the combat, and was content simply to watch the arrows sail, their beauty as they fulfilled their purpose, to fly and to strike.

Then the serenity of the arrows was broken and everything became violence and death. The chicken-man suddenly began hopping uncontrollably, thrusting himself into the air, surprisingly high. The manic leaping was disturbing to watch, the body pulling tight, thrusting repeatedly against the ground. The corrupt body, thrusting and twisting, twisting and thrusting, blood spraying under incredible pressure; the last actions of a doomed creature in agony. So much blood.

Heidel's next arrow struck the second monstrosity, piercing its shell, forcing it to thrash and grasp aimlessly at the shaft protruding from its back.

The witch hunter charged, his sword in hand, Sassen scurrying alongside him, howling at the top of his voice. Heidel quickly lost sight of the tracker as the third creature came at him. He realised with disgust that its body was covered with gaping, slavering, teeth-filled orifices. Its arms were tough and wiry, and the witch hunter knew that if it clutched him those mouths would suck his life. There would be no escape from its clutches.

'You are doomed, spawn!' he cried as he thrust his sword forward, driving it into the creature's belly. It slid along his blade, up to the hilt, yet there was life in it still.

It grasped at him, and held him in its wiry arms, pulling him closer, ever closer still. The strength of its arms was immense, and he felt the mouths as they bit into his flesh.

'Sigmar!' he screamed, and tried to push himself away. But it held him fast.

Desperately he twisted his sword and dragged it upwards, and he felt warm blood and entrails on his hands. There was a terrible bird-screech wail. The fiend's grasp weakened. It slid to the ground.

Heidel staggered back, sword hanging loosely in his hand, sweat and blood dripping over his eyes. He was vaguely aware of Sassen fighting something on the other side of the clearing. Weakly he spun around – and something huge and black loomed before him.

The Dark Warrior was seven feet tall, a great battle-axe in its mailed fist. Heidel felt dwarfed by it, as if he stood before something from another age, something eternal. For a moment he was motionless, paralysed by awe. He realised that this would be the moment of his death. From behind his opponent the sun had risen all red and gold. Its rays gleamed off the black armour and blinded him. The only thing he could see was the silver pendant, set with a brilliant blue gem, hanging tantalisingly around the warrior's neck.

Then a mailed fist struck him in the face, throwing him backwards. Heidel scrambled desperately to the side as the great battle-axe plunged into the earth. He felt the rush of air as it flew past him. Heidel swung his sword sideways and felt it clatter off armour. A deep laughter followed, a laughter so unnatural and mocking that it filled Heidel with rage. The rage became strength and he leaped to his feet and jumped backwards. The axe whirled close to his belly, threatening to gut him.

'Laugh now! But you will die screaming!' Heidel screamed.

But only laughter was returned.

Side-stepping to the right, Heidel lashed out, aiming at the elbow where only the black plates separated revealing only chainmail. He connected, and felt the sword bite, before stumbling sideways

and backwards away from the lethal axe whirling towards him. As he stumbled his foot clipped something – a stone, a root – and his balance shifted, his leg remained stationary, yet his body lurched forward. Desperately he tried to pull his foot forward. Finally he succeeded, in time for his knee to brace his fall.

The warrior was now behind him, unsighted. The terribly notion seized him that something huge and sharp would plunge into his back or cleave his skull. He threw himself to the side and heard a great roar, felt the rush of air on his cheek as if it was a spring breeze.

With great effort he leaped back onto his feet, twisted his body, arcing his sword in one great circular motion. There was a clang as the blow struck his opponent's chest, denting his breastplate and forcing the monstrosity back a step. Glancing around, Heidel noticed the slim figure of Sassen duelling lithely with a beastman, sword flashing time and time again.

Heidel raised his hand to wipe the sweat from his forehead eyes. Soon it would blind him. He lashed out at the colossus as it advanced once more, and again found himself dodging the deadly axe. The witch hunter struck and struck again, and each time the same pattern repeated itself. He thrusting and slashing, his sword glancing off the black armour. The warrior heaving his great axe and plunging it into the thin air: air in which only an instant before Heidel had stood.

Heidel had struck well, denting the armour, drawing blood from between the plates where only chainmail protected the fiend. Yet he knew he stood no chance. One blow from the axe would fell him. Then it would be over. His blows were too small, too weak. Perhaps they drew some strength from the warrior, but Heidel was tiring faster.

Then the inevitable happened: Heidel fell backwards over a corpse. Sweat dripped down into his eyes so everything became a blur. Above him the huge Dark Warrior stood. Behind the monster, the sun shone with a surreal beauty and the immense, ancient axe glinted cruelly. Heidel knew he was dead. There would be no escape.

A sudden explosion, and it was like time slowed to a crawl. A massive dent appearing in the side of the warrior's helmet. Another explosion: the dent pushed further in, and a thousand tiny holes appeared, as if someone had thrust needles repeatedly through the metal. The warrior backed away, suddenly staggering, blood and streams of yellow filth dribbling from beneath the vast helmet. The huge body fell like the edge of a cliff into the sea; foul steam and dust was thrown into the air with a gigantic crash. The dust seemed to hover in the air for a second and then was whisked away from the enormous body by a sudden gust of wind.

Heidel sat and stared, his ears ringing, sweat dribbling into his eyes. Through the ringing came a startling voice.

'Just in time, hey? You know, Heidel, old man, you really should pick better odds.'

Heidel turned his head. There stood a fop: dressed in a frilled silk shirt, a floppy soft hat on top of hair curled into ringlets, a tiny perfectly trimmed moustache, and wearing soft, pointed leather boots. The man held two smoking pistols in his hands.

'Mendelsohn,' Heidel said flatly.



SASSEN HAD TAKEN care of the shell-creature and was now busy piling the bodies together. Heidel was relieved that the tracker had not been killed in the fight. He had lost track of the little man for most of it, but apparently Sassen could handle his sword after all, and though a trickle of drying blood ran down his left arm, he was not badly injured.

'Only a scratch,' the little man had said quietly when Heidel asked about it. The tracker seemed distracted, as if something was on his mind. Heidel assumed it was the result of the combat. He had seen many men shaken after a battle; some were so distraught they were speechless, wept like children, or moaned worse than the wounded.

They were determined to burn the foul bodies. Mendelsohn and Heidel began collecting wood and building the fire up into a pyre.

'You must have passed me in the night,' Mendelsohn grinned. 'I must say, I'm a bit upset that you only left the warrior for me.'

'Have no fear, Mendelsohn. The Empire is crawling with corruption. You should know that, from the circles you move in,' Heidel snapped.

Mendelsohn smiled for a reply and picked up a fallen log, swathed with damp and rotting bark. 'Damn this, it'll ruin my shirt.' He held the log away from his body but bits still fell onto the silk cuffs.

'I'll go and fetch the horses,' Sassen called out from the clearing. He had finished piling the bodies together as best he could and seemed anxious to be away from this place of death and corruption. Heidel nodded in agreement and the tracker disappeared off down the path.

When they had built the fire high enough, Heidel began to throw on the corpses, cringing as he touched their diseased bodies. He was in turmoil. Mendelsohn, the aristocratic dandy, had saved his life. Had the flamboyant fop not arrived, he would now most certainly be dead. But Heidel felt humiliated, bested, and could not bring himself to show gratitude. He had known Mendelsohn some years, long enough to realise that the paths they walked were different ones. He did not entirely approve of that which the noble had taken. Begrudgingly he turned to the other man.

'You arrived at an important time. Thank you, Mendelsohn.'

Mendelsohn raised his head and gave him a brilliant, handsome smile. 'You make it sound like we had a merchant's meeting. "You arrived at an important time..." – otherwise I would never have sold the silver spoons!' A moment passed. 'Oh, call me Immanuel; "Mendelsohn" sounds so formal.'

Heidel struggled for a moment with his manners, then said: 'And you, you can call me Frantz... I suppose.' A moment later,

'So the Baron, he hired you too?'

'The Baron?'

'Baron von Kleist? He set me upon this task.'

'I know of no Baron von Kleist.'

Heidel stopped for a moment, thinking. 'The Baron hired me to recover an heirloom, a most precious thing, that these foul beasts stole. They attacked the caravan which he was taking to Bechafen.'

Mendelsohn looked concerned for a moment and pulled on his small moustache with his fingers. 'This band attacked no caravan. I followed them from Bechafen myself, all the way. Never let them stray far from my sight the whole journey. Where is this von Kleist from?'

'From Altdorf or somesuch. He was moving here to escape the pressures of the capital.'

Mendelsohn pulled harder on his moustache. 'I know most of the nobles in Altdorf, but I have never heard of a Baron von Kleist. What was this heirloom of which he spoke?'

Heidel walked to the massive armoured corpse of the Dark Warrior. The thick metal plates that covered the body were impressive. Great strength would be needed to carry such weight. Even now the enormity of the body and the armour were frightening, as if the Warrior might suddenly leap once more into life.

Heidel was also struck by the stench that emanated from the corpse, flies buzzed and disappeared into the cracks between the plates. He shuddered, imagining what was beneath the armour. The flies preferred what was hidden beneath the plates to the bloody mass that had been the Warrior's head.

'A pendant, spectacular. It was around the neck of this-' Heidel began, then stopped. There was nothing: the pendant was not there. He looked up at the noble.

'Gone?' Mendelsohn raised his eyebrows inquisitorily.

Heidel nodded and turned slowly. 'Sassen.'



TT TOOK THEM half a day to find trace of Sassen's flight. They rode two in line, Heidel sat behind Mendelsohn, clinging as lightly to the man's back as he could. At twilight they came across Sassen's roan, dead by the side of the path.

'He took my grey mare,' Heidel said impassively.

'Aye, and this poor beast looks a little grey itself.' Mendelsohn smiled brilliantly.

Heidel could not understand this incessant cheerfulness. 'Immanuel, how in this world of darkness, do you remain so—'

'Happy?'

'Yes.'

'It's not happiness, it's...' One of his slender hands described a little circle as he thought of the right word. 'It's a sense of humour.'

Heidel thought about that for a moment.

'A sense of humour is one of the ways to fight the darkness, Frantz. If the world is a duality, caught between light and dark, day and night, good and evil, then we understand humour as the opposite of... Damn, I can't think what it's an opposite of right now but...' Mendelsohn threw his arms in the air. 'It's a good opposite anyway.' He laughed to himself.

'Immanuel?' Heidel said seriously.

'Yes.'

'You're a very strange man.'

They rested for a while as the sun went down, ate some dried fruit, salted pork and bread, and let the horse graze. They had reached the point at which Heidel and Sassen had broken through the forest and reached the wider path. To the north lay the thin track along which they had followed the evil band. To the east the wider path continued, the way Mendelsohn had ridden. Both led to the Talabheim-Bechafen road.

'Did you follow me all the way?' Mendelsohn asked.

'No, we cut through the forest from the north. It looks like Sassen is returning that way. Perhaps he thinks it will be quicker.'

'Well, if we follow the wretch directly he

will stay much the same distance ahead of us. If we return to Bechafen on the trail that I took, we will cover more distance but will be able to ride. It's a risk, but it means we have a chance of cutting him off. If however, he reaches Bechafen before us, I fear we will have lost him.'

For three days they rode and it was like a nightmare broken only when they stopped to eat or sleep at night. But sleep was hard to find. To his great irritation, Heidel would doze off only momentarily before being jolted awake. As he lay half-asleep he felt the constant motion of the horse beneath him, as if he was still riding. At other times he felt the roots and rocks digging into his back, every knot and twist. So he spent most of his time in a strange twilight world of insufferable insomnia.

When sleep finally took him, he dreamed strange dreams: of riding the same horse as a cloaked figure. He was too afraid to talk to the man, for he knew that something was not quite right. Once, in the dream, he touched the figure on the shoulder, and the man turned. The face was for a moment caught in the shadows. But as the wan moonlight touched the face Heidel screamed: for it was a corpse, cadaverous and rotten, and curling down from its shrivelled scalp was a cascade of perfect brown ringlets. It had touched its cheeks with rouge, in a gesture monstrous and sickening, and on its face was a grin of yellow, decaying teeth. 'Humour,' it said to him, 'humour is the opposite of...' And those words echoed in frightful ways. But no matter how he tried, Heidel could not get off the horse.



SN THE FOURTH DAY they reached the road, and there they bought fresh horses from a passing merchant for a thousand Crowns. More, thought Heidel, than he had been offered for this task. They enquired and found that a small, weaselly man, riding a grey mare, had passed within the hour.

They caught their first distant glimpse of Sassen as he entered Bechafen – the

tracker riding slowly towards the town's great wooden gates.

'My poor mare,' Heidel muttered, noticing the beast's head drooping with fatigue.

The sun was going down behind them, the chill in the air starting to bite. They followed Sassen's route through the gates, past the two guardsmen who looked indifferently on all those who entered the town. They trailed Sassen as inconspicuously as they could, trying to keep groups of people between them. They were fortunate that there were many on the streets: labourers heading for their favourite tavern, street vendors packing up their goods for the day, farmers driving their carts towards the gates and the hamlets surrounding Bechafen. In any case, Sassen did not check behind him; he did not seem mindful of pursuit, as far as they could tell.

As the two witch hunters made their way through the busy streets, they kept as far behind as they could, and at times feared that they had lost the tracker. But just as they were losing heart, peering desperately into the distance, one of them would notice Sassen heading away down a side street, or just turning a corner in the distance. On and on he went, leading them across the centre of the town, and finally they entered the wealthier quarters, trotting past great rows of town houses, hidden from the road by high walls.

Sassen entered the grounds of a decrepit and decaying building, its eaves cracked and splintered, tiles missing from its roof, a garden overgrown with weeds and grasses. The tracker tied the exhausted horse to a dying tree and disappeared around the side of the house.

'Do we enter now, or rest and return later, refreshed?' Mendelsohn asked.

Heidel noticed that Mendelsohn's handsome face was weary and lined; his eyelids looked leaden, weighed down.

'We could rest now and return later,' Heidel replied. 'If we do we will be able to deal more easily with whatever evil we find. However I fear to tarry, for evil left

alone can prosper and grow.' He paused wearily and squinted. 'I say we enter now, and administer the cure for whatever corruption we may find.'

Mendelsohn nodded his head emphatically. 'Let us finish this business. Later we may rest.'

They tied their horses to the front gate and walked into the front garden of the house. Mendelsohn loaded his pistols while Heidel looked around, sword drawn.

'There must be a back way in,' Heidel whispered.

They crept around the building, daring a peek through the side windows. The place seemed empty; no furniture cluttered the rooms, no fire warmed the air.

The back door, peeling paint clinging to its wooden panes, swung loosely on its hinges. Beyond they could see an empty corridor leading into a shadowy room. As they entered, it occurred to Heidel that the place seemed even more decaying from the inside. The floors were covered with grime and dust, and thick, matted cobwebs hung low from the ceiling. For a moment he felt that he had entered something dead, as if he stood in the dry entrails of something that had once moved and lived. Colour had once adorned these walls; people had once laughed in these rooms and hallways.

They searched the ground floor, and found nothing. Upwards they ventured, but all the rooms were empty.

'It seems we must enter the cellar,' Mendelsohn ventured. 'Though the prospect displeases me.'

The stairs led down into the deepest darkness. Into the very bowels of this dead creature, thought Heidel. He pushed the idea from his mind, for it unnerved him. He was not usually quite so morbid.

Eventually they reached the floor of a dry and empty room. A burning torch hung on the wall facing them, holding back the darkness. Heidel strode across and took it. To his left a narrow tunnel, chiselled through the rock, descended into yet deeper darkness.

'I do not like this, Immanuel,' Heidel whispered.

'Me neither. Yet I fear the solution to which we seek lies deeper down this tunnel. We are left with but one option. Light the way for me.' Mendelsohn walked through the tunnel opening.

Heidel followed, holding torch in one hand, blade in the other. To himself he began to pray: *Ulric, watch over me. Sigmar, guide me.*

The tunnel descended slowly for a hundred paces or so, then levelled out. The floors were smooth as if worn by years of use, but the narrow walls and the roof overhead were craggy. Many times Heidel or Mendelsohn clipped outcrops of rock with their shoulders, arms or knees. The air down here was fetid and foul. Moisture, cold and clammy, clung to the walls and dripped down from the roof, while small puddles splashed underfoot. The two witch hunters could not see very far ahead of or behind them, and the unseen weight of the earth overhead enclosed them. Heidel was in gloomy spirits and Mendelsohn said nothing. Though remaining level, the tunnel wound now left, now right, and before long Heidel had lost all sense of the direction in which they moved. With every step the sense of utter foreboding grew in him.

The stale odour of the still air seemed to increase with each step. With nowhere to go, no fresh air cleansing the tunnel, the smell accumulated into a gagging, noxious, stench that began to sicken Heidel. It brought to mind worms wriggling in dead meat – warming slowly in the sun. Nausea washed over the witch hunter in waves until finally he could bear it no longer and exploded into a fit of coughing.

The noise echoed weirdly down the tunnel. Mendelsohn jumped at the sudden break in the silence and turned. For a confused moment, Heidel's fears leapt from his unconscious: as Mendelsohn had turned, he had imagined his face to be emaciated and cadaverous, a rotting skull, just like the face in his dreams. He gasped and his heart leapt in his chest. But as soon as he had started,

he realised that it was no so. Mendelsohn was just himself.

'What will the ladies of the court think of me now?' Mendelsohn smiled his handsome smile, trying to brush the smell from him with fluttering shakes of his hands. 'I shall have to buy myself some expensive Bretonnian perfume to rid myself of this fetid odour.'

Heidel could not help himself and broke into a shy smile. He did not mention his nightmarish vision, however, and Mendelsohn's words did little to allay Heidel's fears. The pair began walking again and after twenty paces or so the dread had returned. All was the same as before: the stench, the darkness, the water, the loss of a sense of direction. Then just when Heidel felt like suggesting they turn back, a dim light beckoned before them.



HEIDEL AND MENDELSONH crept forwards until they could peak into the chamber beyond. It was a cavern, smooth walled and dry, perhaps two hundred feet long and just as wide. The towering roof disappeared into the darkness above. It must have been a mausoleum of some sort, or perhaps a part of the Bechafen catacombs. Desiccated corpses lay on great stone slabs; bones littered the floor, jutting up at odd angles, in a veritable sea of human remains. Hundreds of narrow holes were cut into the walls, from which more bones protruded. From everything rose the stench of death and decay.

In the middle of the room stood a stone contraption, somewhat like an arch, maybe ten feet high, beneath which stood Sassen. The little man looked up towards the top of the archway, stepped back, turned on his heels and walked out of Heidel's sight. To the witch hunter, the tracker had never seemed so like a weasel, with his pointy, pinched little face, his furry little beard, his beady eyes squinting.

From somewhere out of sight, a familiar voice rose to break the deathly stillness,

and echoed down the tunnel. ‘Come in, Heidel, I’ve been expecting you. And bring your friend.’ It finished with a burst of uncontrollable laughter.

All hope of surprise was gone, if they ever had it, and Heidel felt bitter defeat. Wearily he and Mendelsohn stumbled through into the shadowy mausoleum, arms limply hanging by their sides.

‘You’ve come to witness my triumph, of course. Welcome, Herr Heidel, to the Bechafen catacombs.’ Baron von Kleist stepped into the flickering torchlight towards the arch. A few paces behind him, Sassen loitered more shyly. Swathed in a black robe, the Baron appeared tall and thin to Heidel, much like a cadaver himself. The torches that lit the mausoleum threw great shadows over his body. His skin seemed to be pulled too tightly over his head, and his eyes and mouth seemed to disappear into gaping blackness. His face seemed transformed into a skull. The Baron laughed again.

‘Witness my work: from here Bechafen shall fall! Here I shall open the doorway between life and death. I will conquer death, vanquish nature, and these pitiful bones will rise once more!’ The Baron turned slowly around in a circle and raised his arms up in triumph. He was looking at all the bones and corpses as if they were all the riches of the world; as if, instead of lifeless, rotting bodies, they were gems inlaid with silver and gold.

Heidel’s face twisted in fury. ‘This is blasphemy, infernal sorcerer! And for that you will pay! Sigmar damn you!’

‘Why such harsh words, witch hunter? In condemning me you are only damning yourself. It was you, after all, who was responsible for the return of the key to that doorway between.’ The Baron dangled the pendant before him, taunting the witch hunter. ‘My so-called “guards” ran away with it. So I turned to an employee of an entirely different kind. I thank you for its safe return.’

Von Kleist gave a mocking half-bow. Behind the Baron, Sassen gave a strange little high pitched laugh. Heidel gripped the hilt of his sword in anger. He yearned to swoop upon the little man and repay him for his betrayal. Heidel could feel

Mendelsohn tense and tremble in fury beside him.

‘You have been corrupted, necromancer, and for that you will be sent screaming to the abyss,’ Mendelsohn stated simply, as if he was passing sentence. For a moment the Baron was taken aback by the confidence in the witch hunter’s voice.

But then von Kleist smiled. ‘And what of this?’ he asked as he reached up and implanted the brilliant blue gem of the pendant into the top of the stone archway. A harsh light arced from the gem, sulphur-bright, searing away the shadows of the cavern. A rank smell, as if of burning metal, filled the stale air. Slowly the entire floor seemed to move; the sea of bones swelled into waves. A jaundiced murmuring rose discordantly on the air – and the bones began to move!

Heidel felt unhinged, delirious at the sight, as ages-dead bones ordered themselves: as thighs re-attached themselves to hips, as jaws began chatter, as mottled arms and withered skulls rejoined their bodies. The cavern echoed with the hideous scraping of bones as they slid, as if sentient, in search of the right joint, the correct aperture, with which to connect. The horrendous reek of death choked the air as the entire collection of corpses and body parts shifted and roiled around each other. To Heidel it seemed a hallucination, yet he knew its awful reality. This was no time for dreaming; they must act, or they would die here.

The witch hunters moved with lightning speed. They leaped high and scrambled over moving skeletons, slashing out with their rapiers at claws which tried to grasp them. Heidel kicked at cadaverous hands, pushed himself further forward using skulls as hand-holds, ribs as footholds. He struggled to balance himself on the shifting sea of bones beneath his feet, which seemed to lurch ten feet one way, then ten feet another. He felt nails begin scratch at him, jaws bite. More than once he felt sharp pain and his blood flow.

Heidel heard two explosions in swift succession, and watched Sassen fall

howling, his face ghastly white, two holes blasted in his chest. He glanced around wildly, but could not see Mendelsohn. The witch hunter had only moments before he would be drowned in a sea of gnashing corpses. Desperately he tried to reach the Baron, slashing frantically as he tried to carve a path through the shifting bones.

Baron von Kleist was prepared. Beneath his breath he muttered something arcane and guttural. From his suddenly outstretched hand a ball of livid red flame shot towards Heidel, who ducked uselessly as searing fire wrapped itself around his body. Someone screamed agonisingly, a wail which rose and rose until Heidel wished that whoever it was would stop. Then, as it finally died out, the witch hunter realised that he, Heidel, had been the one screaming. He raised his head to see another fireball speeding from the Baron's hand. The fire embraced him again; his agonised wail broke unbidden from him once more. As the pain died he saw, from the corner of his eye, Mendelsohn, who had scrambled rapidly over the rising bones and reached the arch. The other witch hunter stood behind the Baron, arm raised with a stone in hand.

No, Heidel screamed inside, mouth barely able to form the words. Mendelsohn! You're facing the wrong way...

Mendelsohn faced not towards the Baron, but towards the arch. The stone came down, with all the force that Mendelsohn could muster in his body – directly onto the blue gem of the pendant set into the arch. A third vast fireball exploded around the hellish cavern, but this time the fire did not touch Heidel. This fire was white and searing, and it flowed from the gem in the archway like a river of flame. Flame that engulfed Mendelsohn and tossed the Baron aside with its force.

Around Heidel the bones shuddered, as if in memory of agonising pain. Then they collapsed like puppets with their strings severed.

With renewed vigour, Heidel leaped forward and landed before the Baron,

who was struggling onto his hands and knees amidst the scorched cadavers. Heidel kicked out and von Kleist was flung backwards. The Baron scrabbled, belly exposed, hands desperately searching for purchase on the carpet of bones. The witch hunter thrust downwards, feeling the sword pierce vital organs, slip between bones.

A look of shock crossed the Baron's face. 'No!' he howled. 'This cannot be!'

'Know this, necromancer!' Heidel cried. 'I am a witch hunter. I will seek out evil wherever it raises its misshapen head, and I will wipe its pestilence from this world. You are leprous and corrupt. Return to the abyss from whence you came.'

When his words finished, the Baron was dead.

Heidel rushed over to Mendelsohn's side, but was too late. In destroying the pendant, the flamboyant witch hunter had destroyed himself.



HEIDEL DID NOT stay long. He muttered a few words under his breath, a prayer of sorts:

What is it to be a witch hunter?

To toil endlessly against the dark.

What then will be our reward?

We ask for none and none is received.

When can ever we stop?

When the cold grave eternal calls us to rest.

Heidel stood and turned to leave. But he stopped himself, bent down and picked up a metal object from the floor. It was an ornately carved pistol, the silver a little blackened with soot. He turned it over in his hand. It was heavy, yet fit well in his palm. *Well weighted*, he said to himself. *I think I will learn to use this*, he said. Yes, *I think I will*. Then he placed it beneath his belt. *I might not buy a silk shirt though*.

In his head he heard Mendelsohn's voice. *Humour is one of the ways to fight the darkness*, it said. Heidel smiled briefly and began the long walk back to the surface of the town. ●

A Family Curse

or

The Questing

Rossereux

Gaston

Louisa

Matheui

Lillian

Jules

Marie

Guillame

Thierry

Eduoard

Joan

Lydia

Agnes

Gaston



Gaston
2637-2673

GBrother Gaston Rossereux, have set these plaques upon the family chapel wall to both record the tragic nature of my family's questing curse, and so that all reading them may question where the true path to Honour lies.

My great-great-grandfather, Gaston, served Sir Guillame d'Abois as a young squire, yet was restless to earn the opportunity to become a Knight Errant. It was a wish fuelled by his desire to marry the fair Mirabelle, Sir Guillame's beautiful daughter. Providence soon played its part. Assessing the Morlaix forests for a forthcoming hunt, he stumbled across the infamous bandit 'Grim' Gaspard. The foul brigand sprung up from where he had been crouched, skinning a poached deer. Wielding his lowly quarterstaff, Gaston's succession of fierce blows knocked him down. As the staff plunged forward, the brigand's broadsword parry sliced through the hard wood but unswerving the shattered point struck deep. Thus he earned his title as Knight Errant.

His lord's lands lay in Montfort, where the Grey Mountains' steep flanks penetrate into that dukedom. Spilling forth from these rocky crags, Orc warlord Ormscar Windhowl had seized the Domain of Christofain. He now held court in the smoke-blackened, bloodstained, ruined shell of the castle. Gaston swore he would recapture these lands for Bretonnia. Twisting Mirabelle's silk scarf around his helm he rode forth. The fetid greenskins were celebrating their great battle by consuming the contents of the castle's looted wine cellars, whilst feasting upon the flesh of slaughtered livestock. The young knight's bright sword cut a murderous swathe through the startled rabble, until only Ormscar stood against him. The fearsome warlord raised his serrated sword on high.

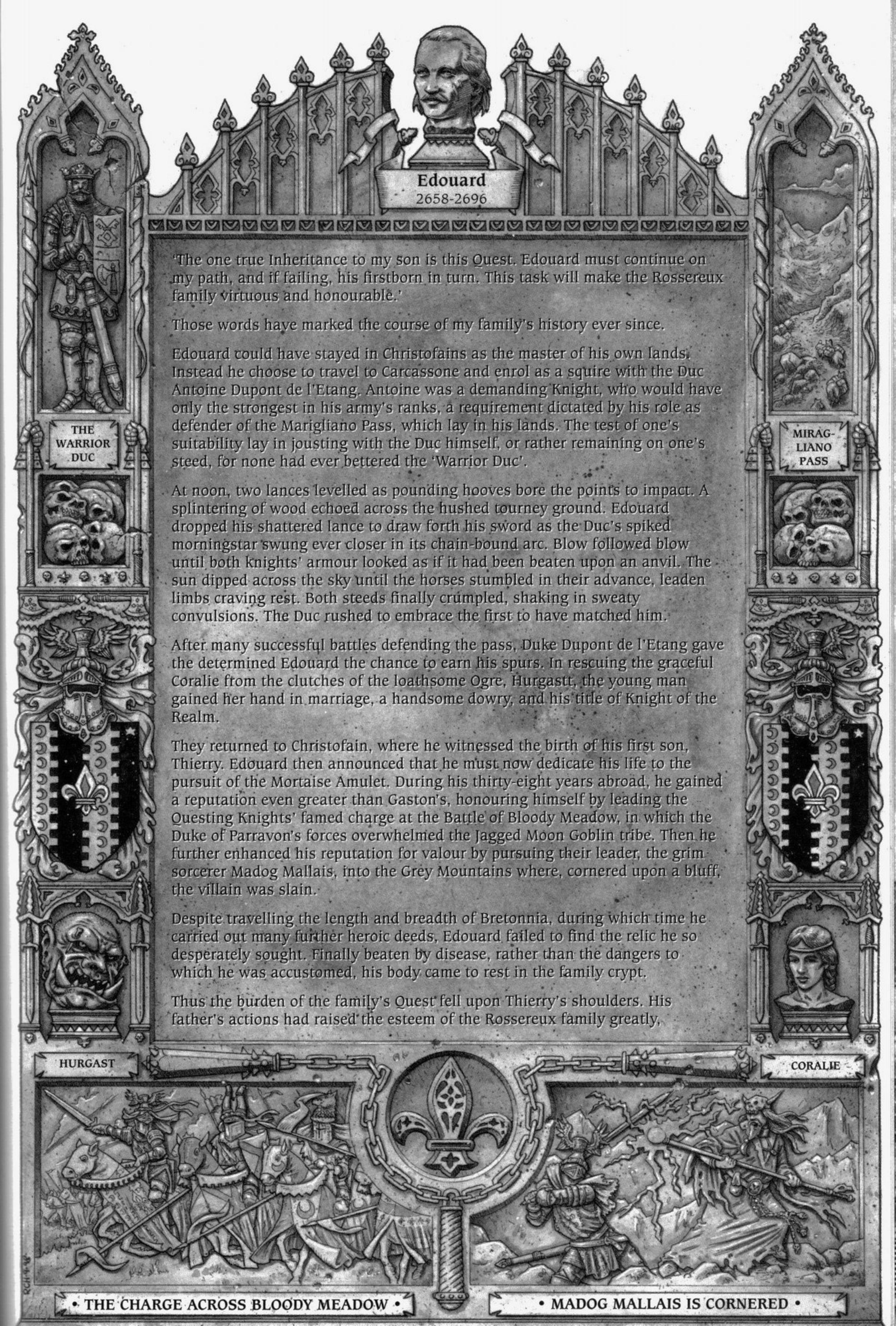
The figure which rode back into d'Abois's courtyard was barely recognisable. Only force of will held him erect in his saddle, yet proudly aloft a lance was held. A lance whose point was adorned with the dismembered gruesome head of Ormscar Windhowl.

Thus it was that Gaston established the Rossereux family seat at Christofains, with beautiful Mirabelle at his side. Still Gaston's vaunting ambition could not be repressed. As his firstborn, Edouard, reached his tenth year he left on a quest. His object was to find the fabled artefact worn by the heroic Grail Knight, Sir Algernon de Mortaise. It had been dipped in the magical waters of the Grail, and been buried with its master amongst the tombs of our ancestors in the mysterious hills of the Pale Sisters – a resting place from which it had been cruelly ripped by greedy and thieving hands. Gaston pledged to recover it so that it might rest upon an honourable Bretonnian's bosom.

Years later, Gaston returned without the Mortaise Amulet, but mortally wounded. He was buried in a sealed casket within the family vaults, leaving only his final words to haunt future generations:

D'ABOIS

CHRISTOFAINS



Edouard

2658-2696

'The one true Inheritance to my son is this Quest. Edouard must continue on my path, and if failing, his firstborn in turn. This task will make the Rossereux family virtuous and honourable.'

Those words have marked the course of my family's history ever since.

Edouard could have stayed in Christofains as the master of his own lands. Instead he chose to travel to Carcassone and enrol as a squire with the Duc Antoine Dupont de l'Etang. Antoine was a demanding Knight, who would have only the strongest in his army's ranks, a requirement dictated by his role as defender of the Marigliano Pass, which lay in his lands. The test of one's suitability lay in jousting with the Duc himself, or rather remaining on one's steed, for none had ever bettered the 'Warrior Duc'.

At noon, two lances levelled as pounding hooves bore the points to impact. A splintering of wood echoed across the hushed tourney ground. Edouard dropped his shattered lance to draw forth his sword as the Duc's spiked morningstar swung ever closer in its chain-bound arc. Blow followed blow until both knights' armour looked as if it had been beaten upon an anvil. The sun dipped across the sky until the horses stumbled in their advance, leaden limbs craving rest. Both steeds finally crumpled, shaking in sweaty convulsions. The Duc rushed to embrace the first to have matched him.

After many successful battles defending the pass, Duke Dupont de l'Etang gave the determined Edouard the chance to earn his spurs. In rescuing the graceful Coralie from the clutches of the loathsome Ogre, Hurgastt, the young man gained her hand in marriage, a handsome dowry, and his title of Knight of the Realm.

They returned to Christofain, where he witnessed the birth of his first son, Thierry. Edouard then announced that he must now dedicate his life to the pursuit of the Mortaise Amulet. During his thirty-eight years abroad, he gained a reputation even greater than Gaston's, honouring himself by leading the Questing Knights' famed charge at the Battle of Bloody Meadow, in which the Duke of Parravon's forces overwhelmed the Jagged Moon Goblin tribe. Then he further enhanced his reputation for valour by pursuing their leader, the grim sorcerer Madog Mallais, into the Grey Mountains where, cornered upon a bluff, the villain was slain.

Despite travelling the length and breadth of Bretonnia, during which time he carried out many further heroic deeds, Edouard failed to find the relic he so desperately sought. Finally beaten by disease, rather than the dangers to which he was accustomed, his body came to rest in the family crypt.

Thus the burden of the family's Quest fell upon Thierry's shoulders. His father's actions had raised the esteem of the Rossereux family greatly,

HURGAST

CORALIE



Thierry
2679-2721

resulting in Thierry's own attendance at the court of the Duc de Montfort. His handsome features, chivalrous nature, success in tournaments and hunts made him a favourite with the castle's maidens, whilst also earning him the title of Knight Errant, but he seems to have been loath to leave the grandeur of court and earn his full Knighthood. Indeed in the end the test came to him.

The despicable knight Hervé de Malpassant had been roaming Bretonnia's fair lands. He sought challenges with honourable knights then, upon killing them, seized their lands. Arriving at the Montfortian estates his gauntlet was duly laid, but rather than it being picked up by the aged Duc Thierry seized the challenge as his champion. The grinning dark knight's great strength forced Thierry back under a rain of blows that began to reduce his shield to kindling. As Hervé began to tire, however, the cunning youth struck under his foe's sword-arm. The sword didn't stop its thrust until hilt rested against breastplate. The fiend gurgled a dying curse as his body juddered through the motions of its final death dance. The victory secured a marriage with the virtuous Gwendolyn, a cousin of the King himself. Thierry was granted the title of Castellan and given command of the Montfortian border castle, Petitmonte.

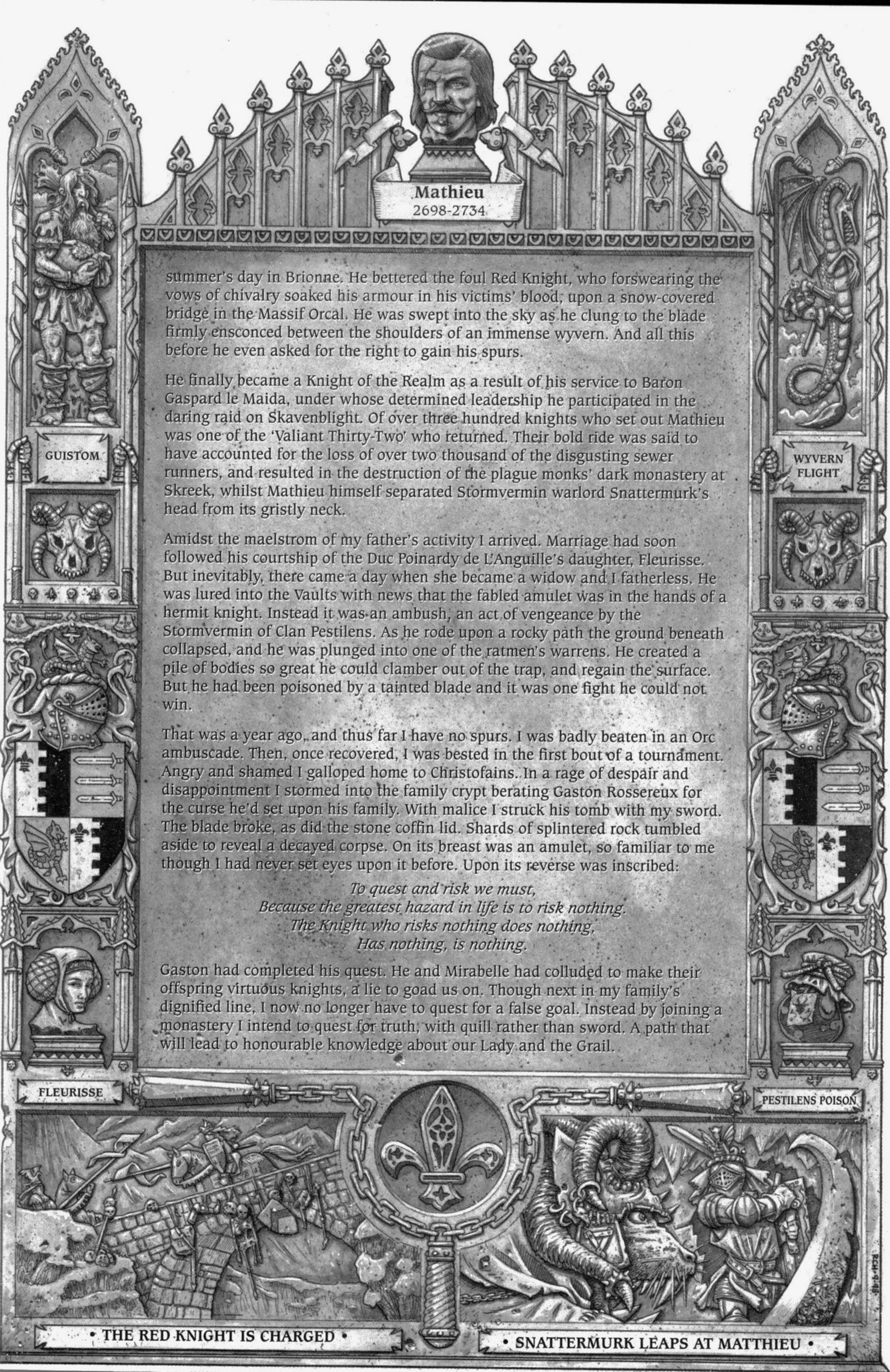
In his latter days, my grandfather spoke happily of his time in the grand halls of Petitmonte, soft words that were rare compared with the bitterness that usually flowed from the twisted lips of his crippled frame, a bitterness which stemmed from what he felt was a cruel fate. For he had none of the restlessness of our forbears and cruel jibes had been aimed at him whilst he hunted with his adolescent heir, Mathieu, for Thierry had failed to adopt the Rossereux Quest. The jibes soon grew into outright discourtesies. He was no longer invited to the Montfort court. Feeling truly shamed, he had a Fleur de Lys emblazoned upon his coat-of-arms before he rode out for the Forest of Arden. The amulet was allegedly hoarded with other treasures in the lair of the dread dragon, Sheonat. By now Thierry was no longer young, and the challenge was great. He was lucky to escape with his life – and without the amulet.

Thierry spent over a year in bedridden convalescence, a year in which Petitmonte was passed to a Castellan more fit for the duties. A year in which Gwendolyne succumbed to the grievous plague which swept their cold chambers in Christofains. A year in which Thierry realised he was crippled, and had let the name of Rossereux slip, seemingly irrevocably, from grace. Hervé Malpassant's final curse had played itself out. As Mathieu nursed his dying father, he was impressed with the need to restore the family honour by completing their ancestor's great quest.

There are few other tales that can match the telling of Mathieu's exploits. He was both fearless and gallant. He slew the giant Guistom on one bloody

THE HUNT

HERVÉ



Mathieu
2698-2734

summer's day in Brionne. He bettered the foul Red Knight, who forswearing the vows of chivalry soaked his armour in his victims' blood; upon a snow-covered bridge in the Massif Orcal. He was swept into the sky as he clung to the blade firmly ensconced between the shoulders of an immense wyvern. And all this before he even asked for the right to gain his spurs.

He finally became a Knight of the Realm as a result of his service to Baron Gaspard le Maida, under whose determined leadership he participated in the daring raid on Skavenblight. Of over three hundred knights who set out Mathieu was one of the 'Valiant Thirty-Two' who returned. Their bold ride was said to have accounted for the loss of over two thousand of the disgusting sewer runners, and resulted in the destruction of the plague monks' dark monastery at Skreek, whilst Mathieu himself separated Stormvermin warlord Snattermurk's head from its gristly neck.

Amidst the maelstrom of my father's activity I arrived. Marriage had soon followed his courtship of the Duc Poinardy de L'Anguille's daughter, Fleurisse. But inevitably, there came a day when she became a widow and I fatherless. He was lured into the Vaults with news that the fabled amulet was in the hands of a hermit knight. Instead it was an ambush, an act of vengeance by the Stormvermin of Clan Pestilens. As he rode upon a rocky path the ground beneath collapsed, and he was plunged into one of the ratmen's warrens. He created a pile of bodies so great he could clamber out of the trap, and regain the surface. But he had been poisoned by a tainted blade and it was one fight he could not win.

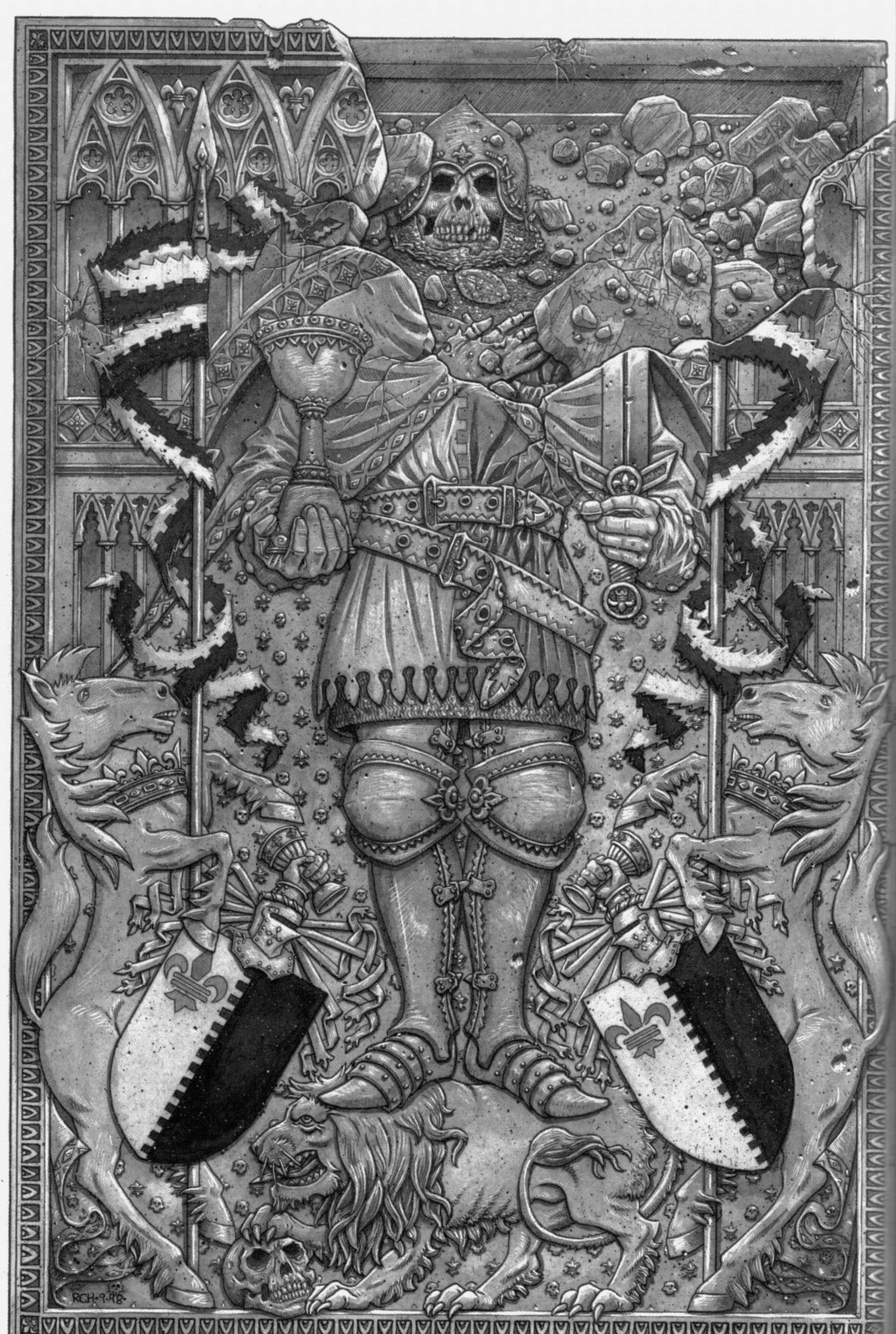
That was a year ago, and thus far I have no spurs. I was badly beaten in an Orc ambuscade. Then, once recovered, I was bested in the first bout of a tournament. Angry and shamed I galloped home to Christofains. In a rage of despair and disappointment I stormed into the family crypt berating Gaston Rossereux for the curse he'd set upon his family. With malice I struck his tomb with my sword. The blade broke, as did the stone coffin lid. Shards of splintered rock tumbled aside to reveal a decayed corpse. On its breast was an amulet, so familiar to me though I had never set eyes upon it before. Upon its reverse was inscribed:

*To quest and risk we must,
Because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.
The Knight who risks nothing does nothing,
Has nothing, is nothing.*

Gaston had completed his quest. He and Mirabelle had colluded to make their offspring virtuous knights, a lie to goad us on. Though next in my family's dignified line, I now no longer have to quest for a false goal. Instead by joining a monastery I intend to quest for truth, with quill rather than sword. A path that will lead to honourable knowledge about our Lady and the Grail.

FLEURISSE

PESTILENS POISON



RCH-948



Daemonblood, by Ben Counter

The Ultramarine armour fused to his muscular frame, the plasteel plates transforming into a living metal which drew itself into biological curves that oozed dark fluid at the joints. The Plaguebearers brought him a morningstar. The haft was cut from the leg bone of some monstrous beast, and the head had been hacked from a stone so black it drank hungrily at the light. On his other arm was a shield as tall as he was, drenched in such sorcerous elixirs that it could turn the blows of gods. Castus held his new arms high above him and screamed a never-ending scream, so that even Nurgle on his throne of decay would hear him.

Deliverance, by Gav Thorpe

We manage to stave off the assault and as the Tyranids fall back across the plain a cheer starts up by the gatehouse and spreads along the wall. I let my men cheer along as well, though we've got little to celebrate. The shock of the close call with the Termagant is beginning to creep up on me. I see the Colonel striding along the walkway towards me, his face as grim as ever. I've never seen him break into a smile, not once. 'Kage! Clear away the dead.' Just more orders, more work, more fighting and dying to be done.

The Darkness Between, by Rjurik Davidson

The dark warrior was seven feet tall, a great battle axe in his mailed fist. Heidel felt dwarfed by it; he stood before something from another age, something eternal. For a moment he was motionless, paralysed by awe. The witch hunter realised that this would be the moment of his death. The only thing he could see was the silver pendant, set with a brilliant blue gem, hanging tantalisingly around the warrior's neck.

A Family Curse, by Ralph Horsley

At noon, two lances levelled as pounding booves bore the points to impact. A splintering of wood echoed across the bushed tourney ground. Edouard dropped his shattered lance to draw forth his sword as the Duc's spiked mace swung ever closer in its chain-bound arc. Blow followed blow until both knights' armour looked like it had been beaten upon an anvil. The sun dipped across the sky until the horses stumbled in their advance, leaden limbs craving rest. Both steeds finally crumpled, shaking in sweaty convulsions. The Duc rushed to embrace the first to have matched him.

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